VISIT…

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Epic Comics Book 2 $4.95 $6.00 CAN

CLIVE BARKER'S HELLRAISER™

Marc McLaurin
Jorge Zaffino

James Robert Smith
Mike Hoffman

Dwayne McDuffie
Kevin O'Neill

Mark Kneece
Scott Hampton

Philip Nutman
Bill Koeb

The Vault
Mark McLaurin
writer
Jorge Zaffino
artist
Julie Michel
color
Phil Felix
letterer
page 3

Diver's Hands
James Robert Smith
writer
Mike Hoffman
artist
page 19

Writer's Lament
Dwayne McDuffie
writer
Kevin O'Neill
artist
James Novak
letterer
page 35

The Threshold
Mark Kneece
co-writer
Scott Hampton
co-writer/artist
Phil Felix
letterer
page 39

The Pleasures of Deception
Philip Nutman
writer
Bill Koeb
artist
Gaspar Saladino
letterer
page 47

front and end piece illustration by
Jon J Muth

page 18 illustration by
Bill Sienkiewicz

page 34 illustration by
Mike Mignola

cover art by
Simon Bisley

FOREWORD

Horror comics, for too long a neglected and lonely corner of the night forest, have had good cause to cavort and howl at the moon of late; the past year has seen the overplayed riffs of the old E.C. comics put aside in favor of wickedly innovative and quality conscious projects in tune with both the potential of terror and the comics medium. These include Stephen Bissette's wonderfully unwholesome **Taboo**, **Tapping The Vein**, Eclipse Comics' excellent adaptations of Clive Barker's **Books of Blood**; Arcane's sincerely deranged **Fly In My Eye**; and Epic's own **Nightbreed**, an offshoot of Clive's new film of the same name. Rather than simply going for the sudden shock, the "GOTCHA" of the old school, each of these forums reflects and builds on the horror of *today*, a horror that delights in *disturbing* the reader—and that feeling of being unsettled is one that stays with you long after any mere jolt has faded away.

We like to think the particular downtown ticket you hold in your hands at this moment is also doing its part toward that end. In achieving that lowly goal, we are particularly fortunate in the caliber of talent with whom we are privileged to work, writers and artists who fully encompass the meaning of the word "creator". Helping us put together this puzzle: Working with the bold and powerful talents of Jorge Zaffino (whose art can also be seen gracing **Critical Mass**), Marvel managing editor Marc McLaurin takes us to "The Vault"; Scott Hampton, whose latest work appeared in "Pig Blood Blues" for **Tapping The Vein**, was good enough to introduce us to the tales of Mark Kneece, with whom Scott collaborated on "The Threshold"; fresh from getting under people's skins in **Taboo**, James Robert Smith and Mike Hoffman bring us "Divers Hands"; **Marshal Law** artist and co-creator Kevin O'Neill joins **Damage Control** writer Dwayne McDuffie for a "Writer's Lament"; and in "The Pleasures of Deception" longtime **Fangoria** contributor Phil Nutman (also appearing in the recent **Book of the Dead** anthology) teams up with artist Bill Koeb, soon to contribute art to **Interface**.

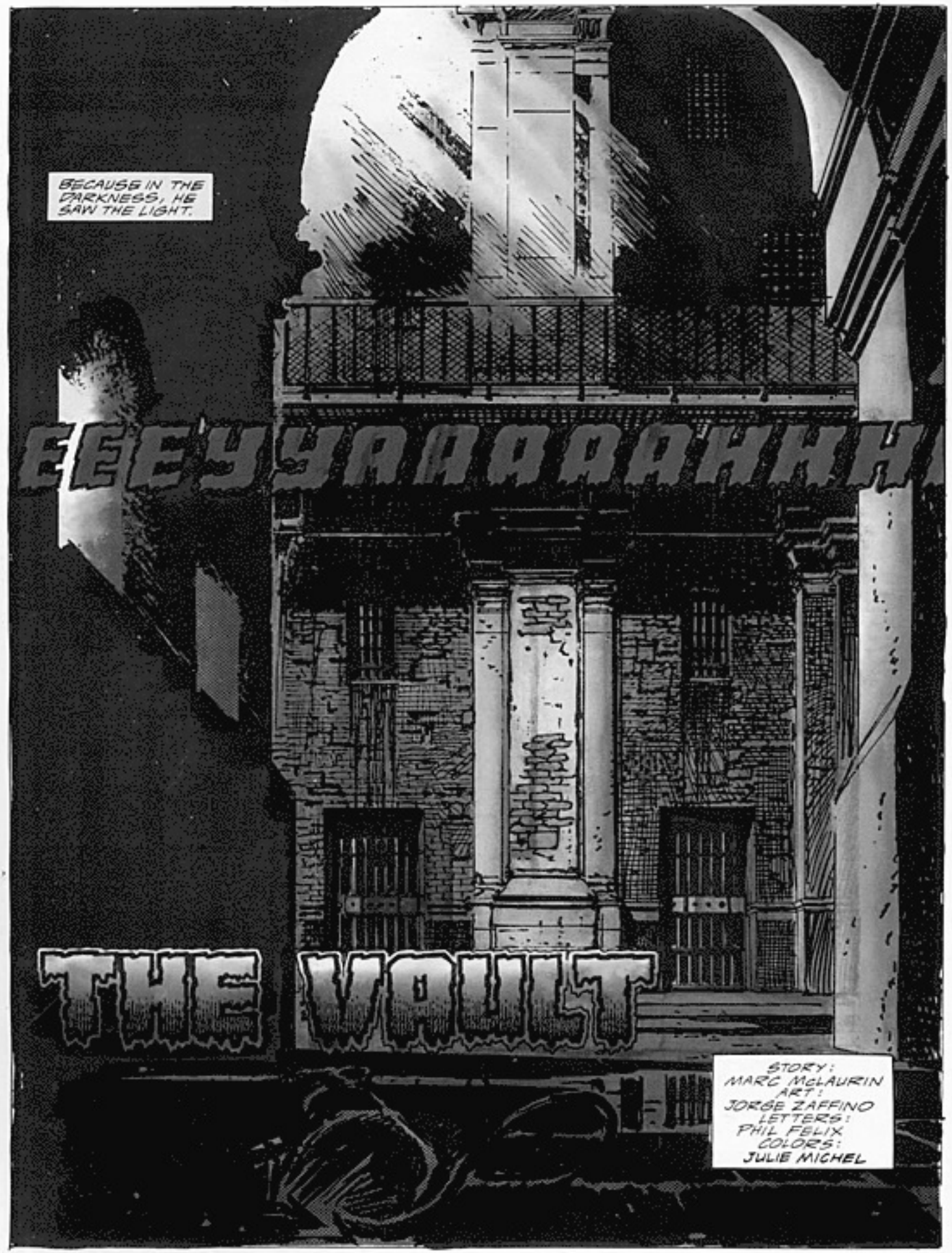
Overseeing this damnable bunch is Margaret Clark, who takes over the editorial reigns from myself as of this issue. Margaret is the one primarily responsible for the high standards set for many of Epic's books, including **Moonshadow**, **Akira**, the **Moebius Graphic Novels**, and **Havok & Wolverine: Meltdown**. She has graciously offered me this space to speak my longwinded piece, and she promises to continue to make hell a place you'll want to come back to again and again (as if you have any other choice with hell!).

These things said, I leave you in able hands—able to wield knives and power tools, able to wipe surfaces clean of fingerprints, able to tear flesh from bones. As for myself, I'm going to open my "going away" present—it's a small box, but with the way everyone's gathered around so eager to see me open it, it must be something special.

I wonder what's inside...?

Daniel Chichester
consulting editor

A COUNTRY IN SOUTH AMERICA.
A COUNTRY IN FLUX, ABOUT TO BURN RED WITH THE FLAMES OF REVOLUTION. IN THE NIGHTMARE OF A FIGHT FOR FREEDOM, ONLY ONE PLACE IS ABLE TO MAINTAIN ORDER.
PRISON.
A BLIGHT ON THE LANDSCAPE, THIS PARTICULAR PRISON HAS BECOME A RIGIDLY SCREAMING SYMBOL OF DESPAIR.
ITS OFFICIAL NAME IS YEARS LOST, IN FAVOR OF ONE MORE DESCRIPTIVE OF ITS SOUL...
...LA ENFERMIDAD.
IN CONTRAST TO THE SURROUNDING FIRES OF REVOLUTION, THE DARKNESS OF LA ENFERMIDAD IS PERFECTION.
AND ARMANDO GARCIA HAS ALWAYS SOUGHT PERFECTION.
AT FIRST, HE SOUGHT CHANGE THROUGH CHAOS, BANKING THE FLAMES OF REVOLUTION. CHASING BACK THE DARKNESS.
BUT THEN IN THE DARKNESS, HE SAW THE LIGHT.
HE SOLD HIS LIFE AND HIS CAUSE FOR A LITTLE BLACK BOX WHICH PROMISED HIM POWER--AND FREEDOM OF THE ULTIMATE REVOLUTION.
FREEDOM... FREEDOM...


BECAUSE IN THE DARKNESS, HE SAW THE LIGHT.
EEEYAAAAAHHH!
THE VAULT
STORY: MARC McLAURIN
ART: JORGE ZAFFINO
LETTERS: PHIL FELIX
COLORS: JULIE MICHEL

I TRUST OUR "GUEST" IS ON HIS WAY TO THE COURTYARD? THE SHOW IS ABOUT TO BEGIN.
TARDINESS IS UNACCEPTABLE, CAPTAIN CORRAZON. WE'VE BEEN APPOINTED TO STRUCTURE THIS REVOLUTIONARY--
-- A SINGULAR HONOR FOR US, AFTER ALL THE TROUBLE THE GOVERNMENT WENT THROUGH TO CAPTURE HIM. HE IS TO BECOME A SYMBOL.
FOR THEM, AND MYSELF.
DIAZ IS KNOWN FOR HIS FIRE. THIS "MATINEE" WILL BE THE FIRST STEP IN SQUELCHING IT.
A SINGULAR HONOR FOR US... AND A PLEASURE.
READY... AIM...
DIAZ IS A FOOL -- ALBEIT A STUBBORN ONE -- BUT HE WILL BE BROKEN. I WILL PRESERVE ORDER...
KRAKK
...OF ONE FORM OR ANOTHER.

SIR, I THINK WE ARE TO GET DIAZ TO REVEAL THE NAMES AND LOCATIONS OF THE OTHER REVOLUTIONARY LEADERS...
I CERTAINLY DON'T KEEP YOU ON TO THINK, CAPTAIN.
THE REVOLUTIONARIES ARE FOOLS. RESTRUCTURING MUST HAPPEN AT ALL LEVELS AT ONCE; FROM THE TOP DOWN, FROM THE BOTTOM UP, AND FROM THE MIDDLE--OUT.
THESE FOOLS PROVOKE ONLY THE BOTTOM LEVEL TO REBEL, AND SO IT IS THIS LEVEL WHICH WILL BE SQUELCHED.
CHANGE WILL NOT OCCUR. THEY MUST LEARN; THERE IS NO ESCAPE FROM WHAT IS.
ESCAPE...
...SIR, WHAT ABOUT THE ESCAPE OF THE MAN IN 27? I HAD THE CELL GONE OVER FROM TOP TO BOTTOM. NOTHING.
NOTHING BUT THAT BOX.
IT'S AS IF HE WAS JUST SWALLOWED UP...

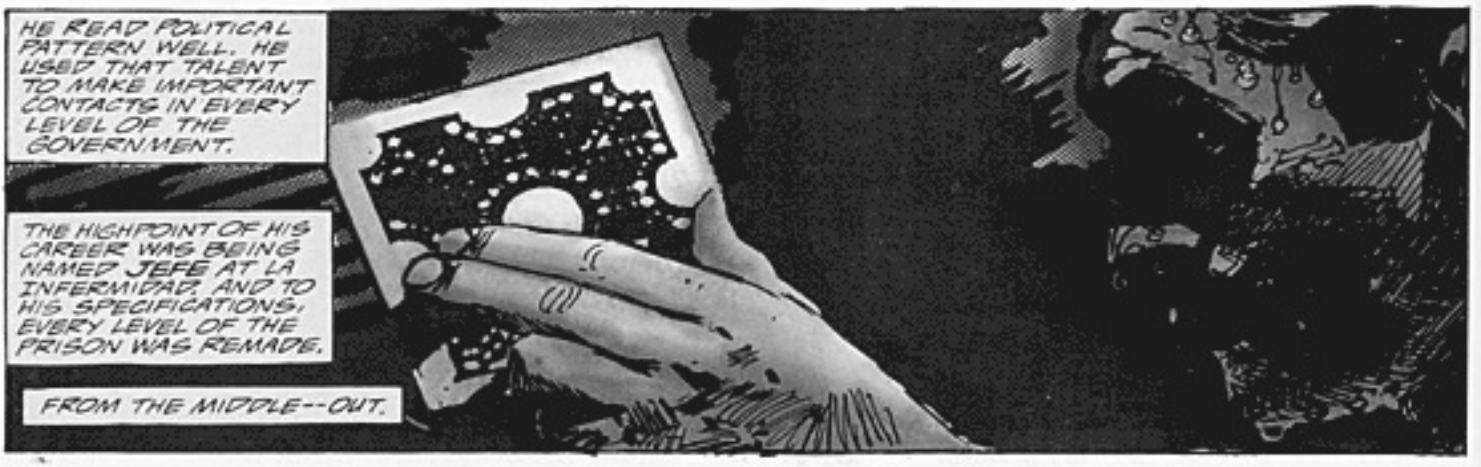
GARCIA WAS IN 27, WASN'T HE? THE REBEL FOOL WHO GAVE US DIAZ, THEN GAVE HIMSELF UP. THE MAD MAN ALMOST SEEMED TO WISH TO BE TAKEN TO LA ENFERMIDAD, LIKE...
...LIKE HE HAD SOME PURPOSE HERE.
I'VE A FEELING I'M BEING PLAYED FOR A FOOL. IF GARCIA DID ESCAPE, THIS BOX WAS HIS KEY.

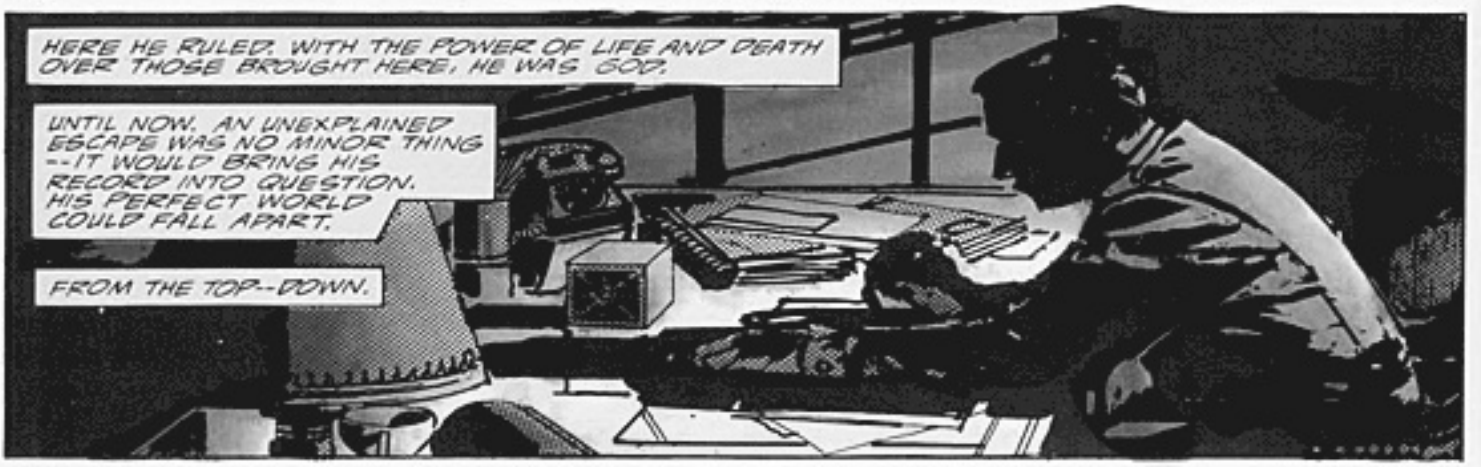
IN ONE FORM, OR ANOTHER.
I WILL HAVE ITS ANSWER.

"IN ONE FORM, OR ANOTHER."

I DON'T KNOW WHAT GAME HE AND HIS FRIEND GARCIA ARE PLAYING, BUT I WILL BREAK THAT MAN.
HAVE THE CELL GONE OVER ONCE MORE, THEN PUT DIAZ IN 27. KEEP HIM UNDER CONSTANT WATCH.
I WILL HAVE MY ANSWER.

ARTURO VELEZ HAS ALWAYS BEEN A PRECISE MAN. HE USED HIS PENCHANT FOR ORDER TO MANEUVER HIMSELF INTO A POSITION OF POWER.
FROM THE BOTTOM--UP.


HE READ POLITICAL PATTERN WELL. HE USED THAT TALENT TO MAKE IMPORTANT CONTACTS IN EVERY LEVEL OF THE GOVERNMENT.
THE HIGHPOINT OF HIS CAREER WAS BEING NAMED JEFE AT LA INFERMIDAD. AND TO HIS SPECIFICATIONS, EVERY LEVEL OF THE PRISON WAS REMADE.
FROM THE MIDDLE--OUT.


HERE HE RULED. WITH THE POWER OF LIFE AND DEATH OVER THOSE BROUGHT HERE, HE WAS GOD.
UNTIL NOW. AN UNEXPLAINED ESCAPE WAS NO MINOR THING --IT WOULD BRING HIS RECORD INTO QUESTION. HIS PERFECT WORLD COULD FALL APART.
FROM THE TOP--DOWN.

UNLESS HE COULD THINK OF SOME WAY TO SOLVE A PUZZLE HE COULDN'T BEGIN TO UNDER-STAND. THERE HAD TO BE A WAY.
YES... YES...

MORNING.
ALFREDO MENDEZ. HAVE YOU HEARD? THE NEWS IS OUT. THE REVOLUTION IS OVER.
YOUR LEADERS ARE IN CUSTODY-- OTHERS ARE SOON TO FOLLOW. THEIR REWARD SHALL BE DEATH. YOU YOURSELF ARE SHORTLY DUE TO BE EXECUTED.
UNLESS YOU'D CARE TO SAVE YOUR OWN SKIN.
GARCIA SOUGHT TO USE THIS STUPID TOY TO ESCAPE. WE STOPPED HIM, OF COURSE. BUT WE'D LIKE YOU TO SHOW US HOW HE PLANNED TO USE IT.
N... NOO.
YOU KNOW ITS SOLUTION. YOU HAVE ONE WEEK TO SHOW ME. ITS SOLUTION IS YOUR FUTURE.
AND YOU HAVE EVERY WAKING MOMENT OF THE REST OF YOUR LIFE TO SHOW ME.
NNO. I DON'... NOOOOOO...
YES.

NOOO!
KRAK!
KRAK!
KAPOW!
KRAK!
I'M SURE HE KNEW. MENDEZ TOOK ME FOR A FOOL. BUT I AM A MAN OF MY WORD.
AND HE IS DEAD.
NO ONE MAKES THAT MISTAKE TWICE. BUT ON TO OTHER BUSINESS.
IS DIAZ ANY CLOSER TO BREAKING?
NO, SIR. DIAZ IS STRONG-- INHUMAN. BUT HE'LL BREAK. HE HAS TO.
FINE. MEANWHILE, BRING ME ANOTHER "VOLUNTEER". TODAY.

UH, SIR... YOU'RE AWARE THAT THE MAGISTRATE AND AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL HAVE ALREADY BEEN NOSING AROUND THE PRISON.
THE MOUNTING DEATH RATE IS CALLING ATTENTION TO US. PERHAPS OUR PRIORITIES WOULD BEST BE SERVED IF WE WAIT BEFORE--
I-DON'T-WANT-TO-HEAR ABOUT PRIORITIES, OR ANY MORE EXCUSES. YOU'D DO WELL TO REMEMBER WHO IS IN CONTROL HERE, CAPTAIN.
I ANSWER TO NO ONE, SO LONG AS PEACE IS MAINTAINED, AND ORDER RESTORED.
THIS MYSTERY IS A BLOT ON MY RECORD. THAT IS THE TOP PRIORITY. UNTIL THAT IS RESOLVED, TO HELL WITH ALL ELSE.
B-BUT DIAZ IS SUPPOSED TO BE (COUGH!) TOP P-PRIORITY! MORE DEATHS ONLY DRAW ATTENTION AND MAKE DIAZ THE MARTYR HE WANTS TO BE. OUR ORDERS...
RESTRUCTURING MUST HAPPEN ON ALL LEVELS. NO ONE IS EXEMPT.
NO ONE.
WHAM!

DAYS LATER.
"YOU DISAPPOINT ME, CAPTAIN. YOU'RE NOT PROVIDING ME THE RIGHT PEOPLE. YOUR INCOMPETENCE IS BRINGING HEAT DOWN ON MY HEAD.
"I'VE NO CHOICE BUT TO BRING THE HEAT TO YOU.
"AND YOU HAVEN'T FELT HEAT UNTIL YOU'VE FELT IT FROM ME.
ALMOST! ALMOST!
"THAT DAMNED BOX MUST BE SOME SORT OF COMMUNICATION DEVICE, OR MAP, OR KEY OF SOME KIND. I NEED THAT ANSWER. BUT IT MUST HAPPEN SOON.
"WE NEED SOMEONE OF INTELLIGENCE TO REVEAL ITS SECRET. WE NEED DIAZ.
"DIAZ WILL SOLVE THE PUZZLE--OR DIE LIKE THE OTHERS.
ALMOST! PLEASE, I'VE NEARLY GOT IT!
"NO, I DON'T GIVE A DAMN ABOUT WHAT 'EL PRESI-DENTE' WANTS. I DON'T GIVE A DAMN ABOUT THE 'REVOLUTION.'
"WHEN I HAVE MY ANSWER, THEY WILL SEE, AND THEY MUST UNDERSTAND...
NO! I WANT TO BE FREE! I WANT TO LIVE!!
"I MUST BE FREE OF THIS.
"BRING THE BOX TO ME."

...THAT IS OUR PROPOSITION, SENOR DIAZ. YOUR LIFE, FOR A SIMPLE SOLUTION. YOU MAKE ME LOOK BAD...
I'M SURE I CAN'T DO ANY WORSE TO YOU THAN GOD ALREADY HAS!
YOU FIND SOMETHING AMUSING, SERGEANT?
N-- NO, SIR.
THAT BOX IS A THING OF EVIL. I'VE HEARD OF ITS LIKE BEFORE. I WILL NOT TOUCH IT.
I WAS PREPARED TO DIE FOR THIS CAUSE THE MOMENT THE REVOLUTION BEGAN. I MAY BECOME A MARTYR. MY CAUSE WILL SURVIVE.
WHILE YOU WILL GO TO HELL.
YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT HELL IS, SENOR.
BUT I WOULD LOVE TO SHOW YOU.
I WOULD LOVE TO SEND YOU THERE.

AAEKKK--
HRMMM... I STILL HOLD YOUR LIFE IN MY HANDS, DIAZ, BUT YOU'LL NOT BE A MARTYR YET. FIRST YOU'LL BE MADE TO SEE THE LIGHT.
ALL YOU LACK... IS STRUCTURE.
AND... AND I CAN... UH...
...WE'LL SEE TO RE-STRUCTURING YOU, ON ALL LEVELS.
FROM THE TOP-DOWN, FROM THE BOTTOM-UP, AND FROM THE MIDDLE --OUT.
GET HIM OUT OF HERE.
HE WILL BE MADE TO SEE THINGS THE CORRECT WAY. THEN BE ALLOWED TO COMPLETE HIS MARTYRDOM.

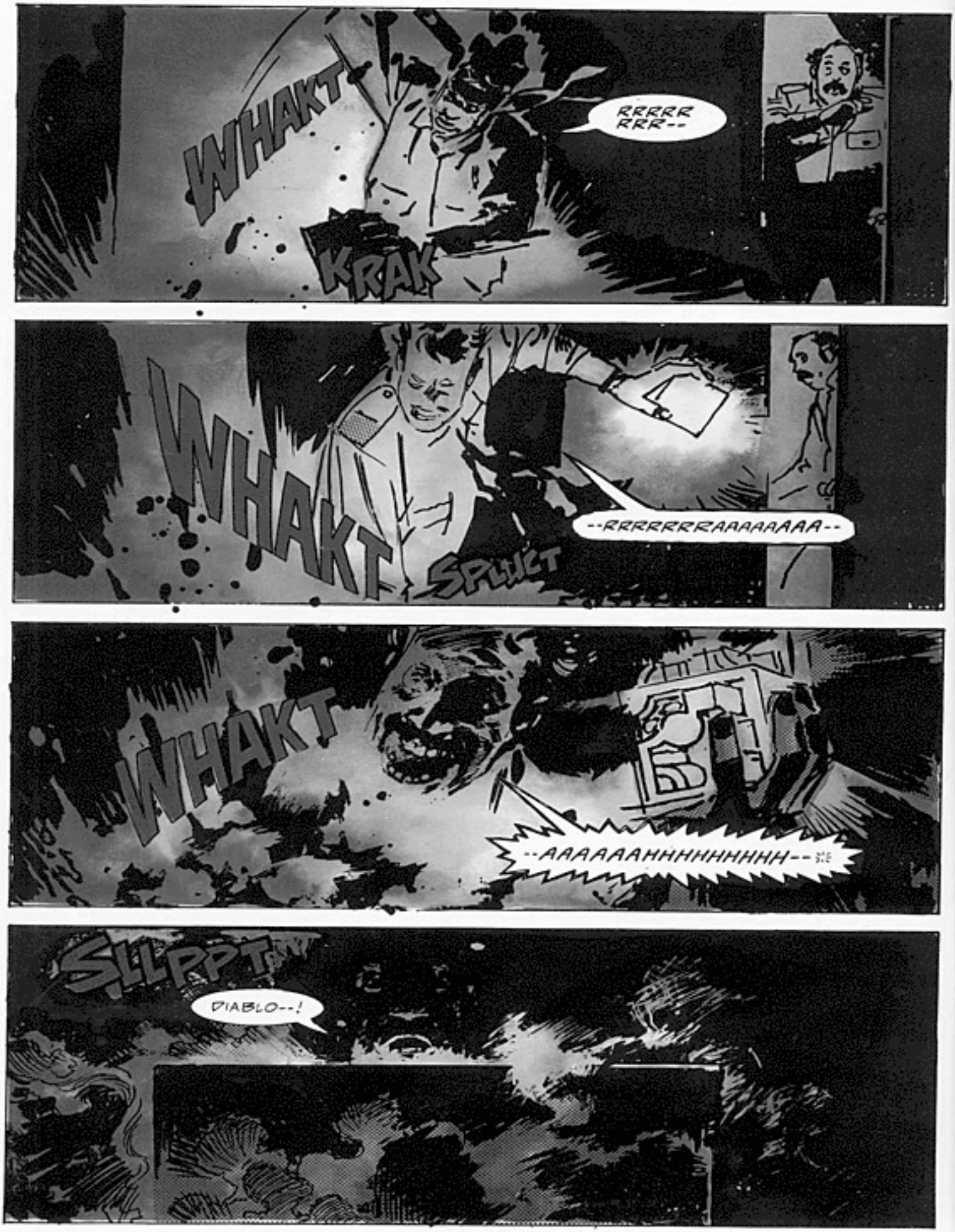
DAYS LATER.
YOUR OBSTINACY IS REMARKABLE, DIAZ, BUT TIRESOME. THROUGH ALL WE HAVE DONE TO YOU, YOU REFUSE TO TOUCH THE BOX. YOU MAKE THE ANSWER CLEAR TO ME. YOU ALREADY KNOW THE ANSWER.
THEY ARE SENDING SOMEONE FROM THE CAPITAL TO RELIEVE ME OF COMMAND. I AM FINISHED HERE.
THAT SHOULD PLEASE YOU.

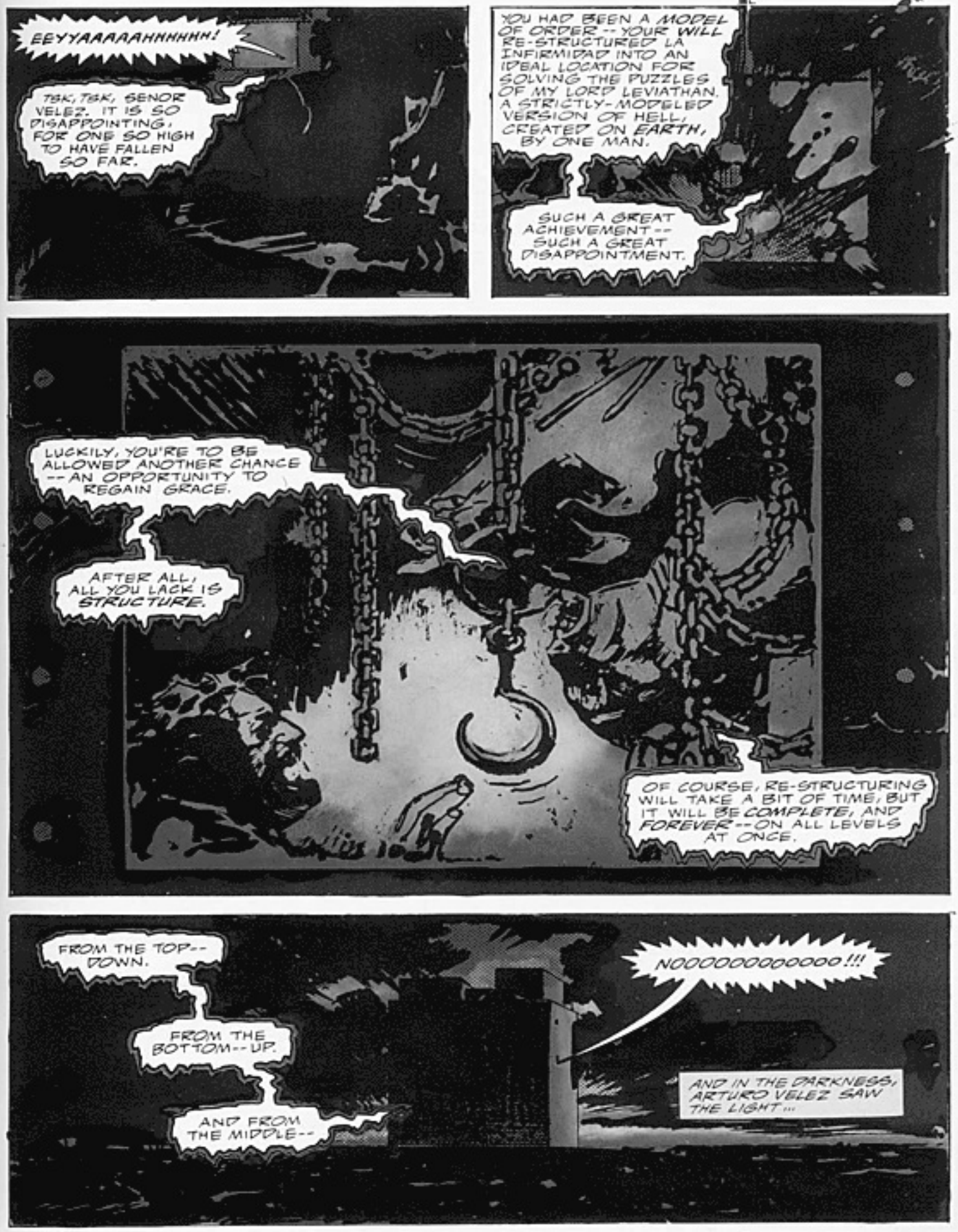
THIS WILL NOT. BEFORE I LEAVE, YOU WILL SOLVE THE BOX, OR DIE. YOUR CHOICE. PICK IT UP.
I WILL HAVE MY ANSWER, NOW.

I HAD A COMRADE WHO SOUGHT SUCH A BOX. HE SOLD HIS SOUL -- AND THE REVOLUTION -- FOR A BOX LIKE THAT.
HE SPOKE OF USING IT TO SUMMON A GREAT ARMY TO AID THE REVOLUTION. TO REMAKE THE WORLD.
THE SEARCH CHANGED GARCIA, BUT THE BOX CHANGED HIM EVEN MORE, UNTIL HE WAS JUST A DARK SHADOW OF HIMSELF.
THE THING IS EVIL -- IT CORRUPTS. I WILL NOT BE TAINTED BY IT.

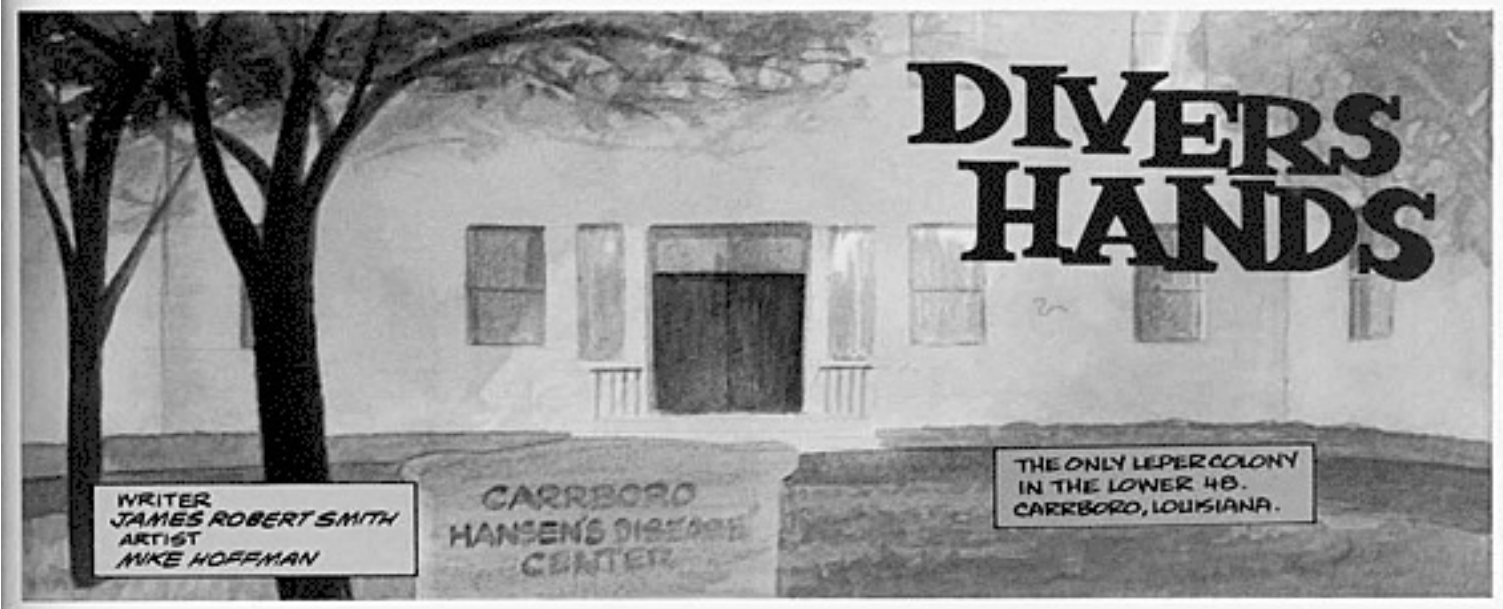
TAKE IT.
NO.

THEN I'LL GET IT FOR YOU.

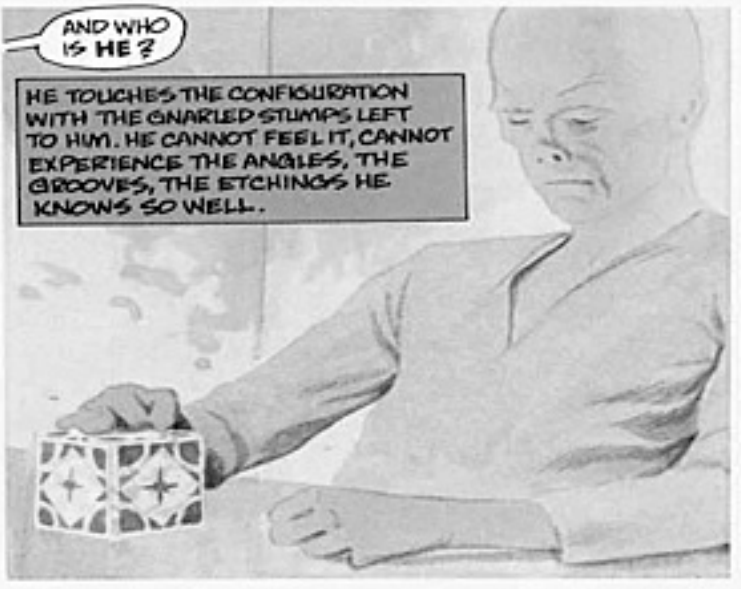

WHAKT
KRAK
RRRRR RRR--
WHAKT
SPLICT
--RRRRRRRAAAAAAAA--
WHAKT
--AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH--
SLRPT
DIABLO--!


EEYYAAAAAHHHHHH!
TSK, TSK, SENOR VELEZ. IT IS SO DISAPPOINTING, FOR ONE SO HIGH TO HAVE FALLEN SO FAR.
YOU HAD BEEN A MODEL OF ORDER -- YOUR WILL RE-STRUCTURED LA INFIRMIDAD INTO AN IDEAL LOCATION FOR SOLVING THE PUZZLES OF MY LORD LEVIATHAN. A STRICTLY-MODELED VERSION OF HELL, CREATED ON EARTH, BY ONE MAN.
SUCH A GREAT ACHIEVEMENT -- SUCH A GREAT DISAPPOINTMENT.
LUCKILY, YOU'RE TO BE ALLOWED ANOTHER CHANCE -- AN OPPORTUNITY TO REGAIN GRACE.
AFTER ALL, ALL YOU LACK IS STRUCTURE.
OF COURSE, RE-STRUCTURING WILL TAKE A BIT OF TIME, BUT IT WILL BE COMPLETE, AND FOREVER -- ON ALL LEVELS AT ONCE.
FROM THE TOP-- DOWN.
FROM THE BOTTOM-- UP.
AND FROM THE MIDDLE--
NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!
AND IN THE DARKNESS, ARTURO VELEZ SAW THE LIGHT...

THIS
END UP


DIVERS HANDS
WRITER
JAMES ROBERT SMITH
ARTIST
MIKE HOFFMAN
CARRBORO
HANSEN'S DISEASE
CENTER
THE ONLY LEPER COLONY IN THE LOWER 48. CARRBORO, LOUISIANA.

THESE ARE OUR PATIENTS WHO ARE IN THE MOST ADVANCED STAGES OF HANSEN'S DISEASE, MARY. THESE ARE THE PATIENTS WHO NEED THE MOST CARE, TO WHOM YOU'VE BEEN ASSIGNED.
I SEE.


AND WHO IS HE?
HE TOUCHES THE CONFIGURATION WITH THE GNARLED STUMPS LEFT TO HIM. HE CANNOT FEEL IT, CANNOT EXPERIENCE THE ANGLES, THE GROOVES, THE ETCHINGS HE KNOWS SO WELL.

THAT'S VINCENT. HE'S A STRANGE ONE. CAME HERE A LITTLE OVER A YEAR AGO PRETTY MUCH IN THE STATE HE'S IN NOW. CAME UP TO US FROM A CLINIC IN MEXICO -- THEY SENT HIM HERE SINCE HE'S AN AMERICAN CITIZEN. EDUCATED FELLOW.
I CAN'T IMAGINE HOW HE ENDED UP LIKE THAT. HE SHOULD'VE KNOWN TREATMENT COULD HAVE ARRESTED THE BACILLUS.

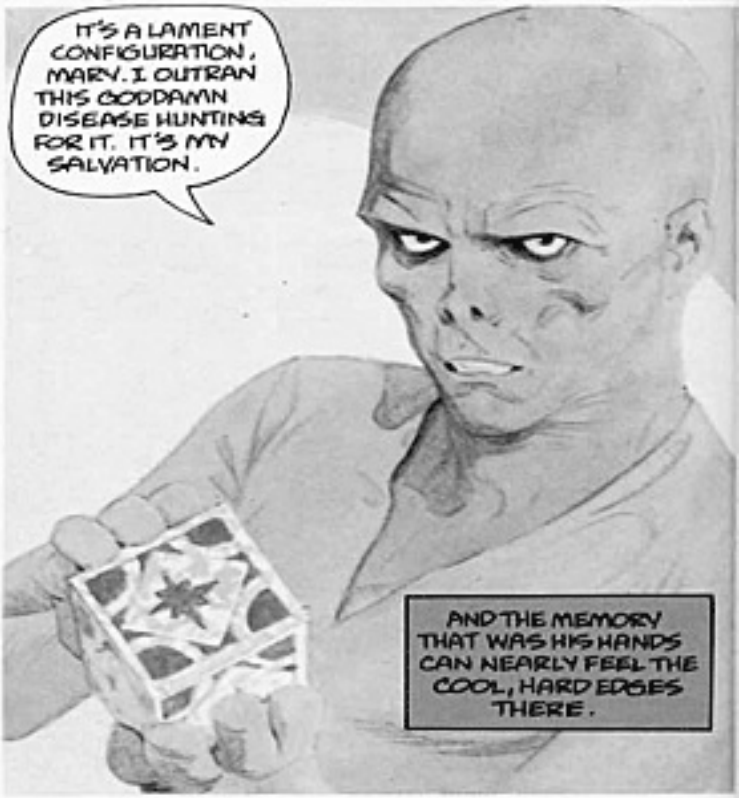
AND WHAT'S THAT HE HAS WITH HIM?
HE IMAGINES HE CAN FEEL THE PUZZLE IN HANDS THAT ARE NO LONGER HIS: AMAZING FLESH QUESTING FOR THE SOLUTION, WONDERFUL DIGITS SOLVING THE PROBLEM.
PROBLEMS WITHIN PROBLEMS.

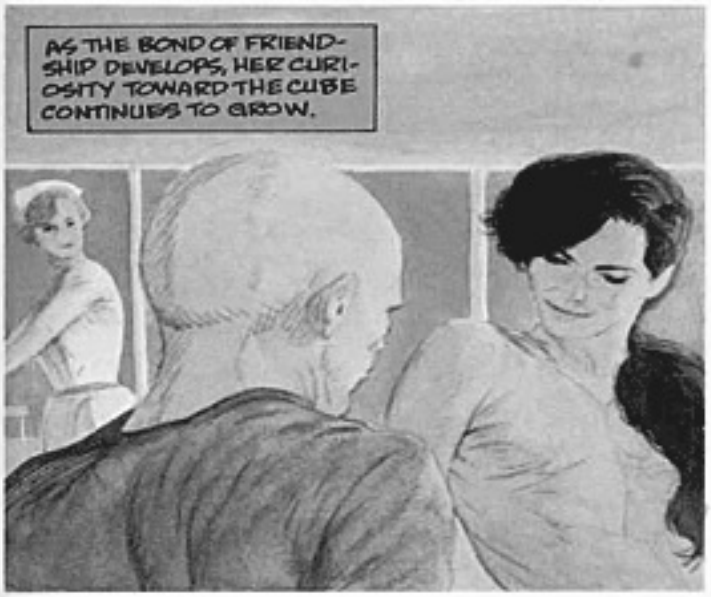
I HONESTLY DON'T KNOW. YOU'LL HAVE TO ASK HIM.
SOLUTIONS, TOO.

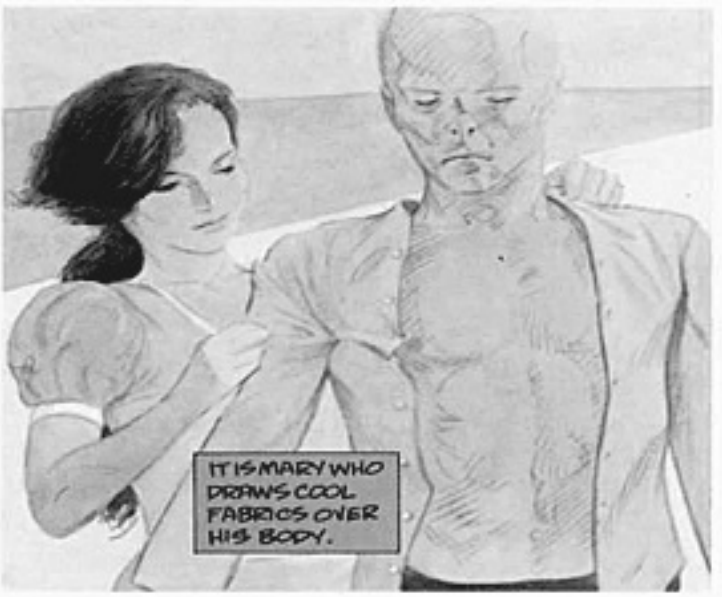
COME IN.

VINCENT, I'VE BROUGHT YOUR MEDICATION.
WATCHING HER, HE WONDERS HOW THE DOOR FELT BENEATH HER RAPPING, TAPPING KNUCKLES; HE WONDERS IF THERE IS PAIN.

WHAT IS THAT BOX YOU ALWAYS CARRY AROUND? WHERE DID YOU GET IT? IT'S...STRANGE.
HE WAITS FOR HER TO TOUCH IT, WANTING HER TO.

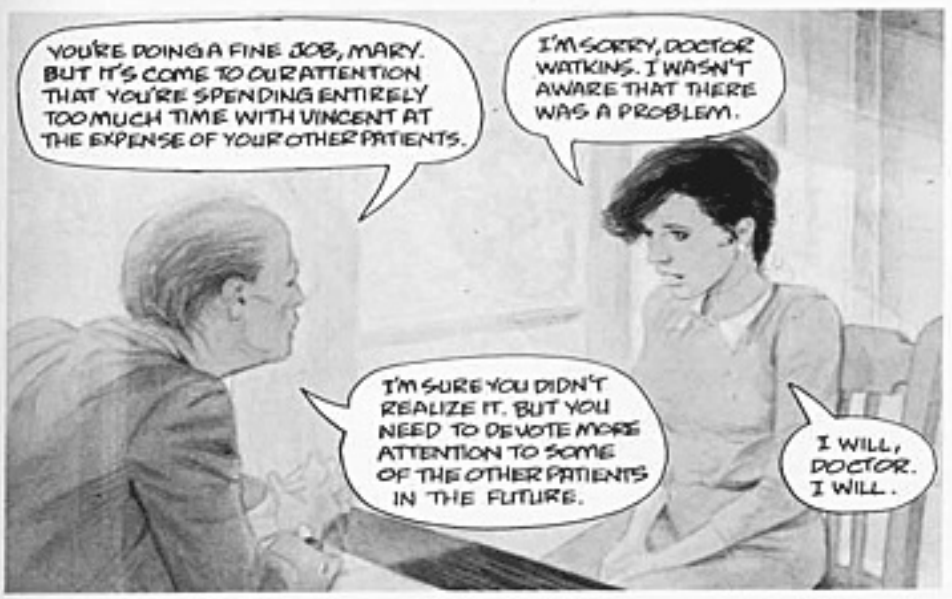

IT'S A LAMENT CONFIGURATION, MARY. I OUTRAN THIS GODDAMN DISEASE HUNTING FOR IT. IT'S MY SALVATION.
AND THE MEMORY THAT WAS HIS HANDS CAN NEARLY FEEL THE COOL, HARD EDGES THERE.

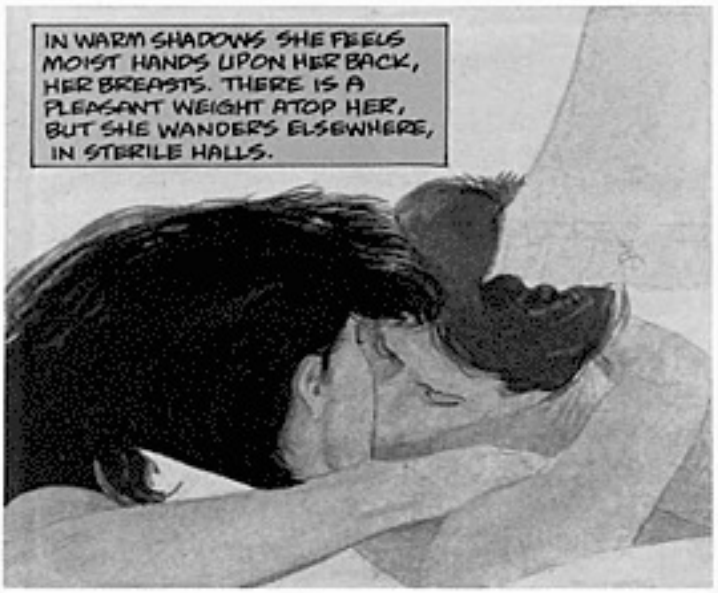

AS THE BOND OF FRIENDSHIP DEVELOPS, HER CURIOSITY TOWARD THE CUBE CONTINUES TO GROW.


IT IS MARY WHO DRAWS COOL FABRICS OVER HIS BODY.

SHE PLACES MEDICINE ON A TONGUE THAT BARELY TASTES, DEPRIVED OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF FLAVOR.

AND HE BEGINS TO TELL HER SOMETHING OF DESIRE.


YOU'RE DOING A FINE JOB, MARY. BUT IT'S COME TO OUR ATTENTION THAT YOU'RE SPENDING ENTIRELY TOO MUCH TIME WITH VINCENT AT THE EXPENSE OF YOUR OTHER PATIENTS.
I'M SORRY, DOCTOR WATKINS. I WASN'T AWARE THAT THERE WAS A PROBLEM.
I'M SURE YOU DIDN'T REALIZE IT. BUT YOU NEED TO DEVOTE MORE ATTENTION TO SOME OF THE OTHER PATIENTS IN THE FUTURE.
I WILL, DOCTOR. I WILL.

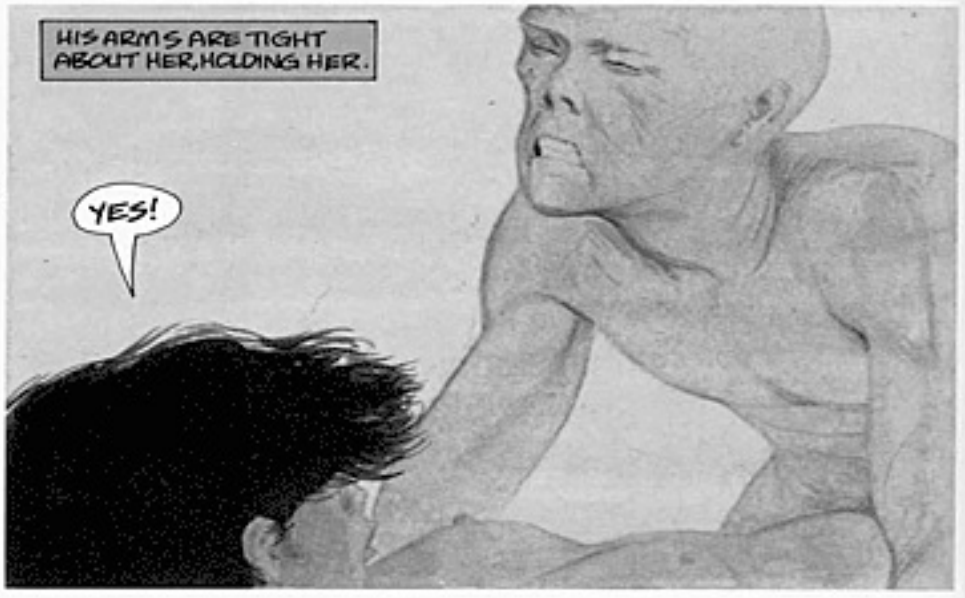

IN WARM SHADOWS SHE FEELS MOIST HANDS UPON HER BACK, HER BREASTS. THERE IS A PLEASANT WEIGHT ATOP HER, BUT SHE WANDERS ELSEWHERE, IN STERILE HALLS.

OKAY. WHAT'S WRONG, MARY? WHAT'S BUGGING YOU. YOU'RE AS COLD AS ICE TONIGHT.

IT'S NOTHING, REALLY. I'M JUST THINKING ABOUT WORK. ABOUT, YOU KNOW, VINCENT. DOCTOR WATKINS SAYS-
JESUS, MARY! CAN'T YOU LEAVE YOUR WORK AT WORK? I'M TRYING TO MAKE LOVE TO YOU. CAN'T YOU FORGET ABOUT YOUR PATIENTS?

AGAIN, SHE FEELS WARM HANDS ON HER, PULLING HER TO HIM. AND THIS TIME SHE IS THERE.
YES.

YES!
SHE FEELS HIM, NOW, PRODDING AT HER, ENTERING.


HIS ARMS ARE TIGHT ABOUT HER, HOLDING HER.
YES!

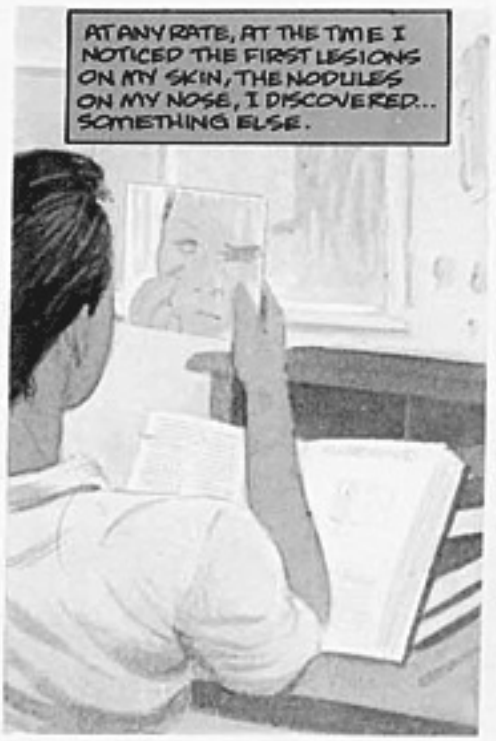
TELL ME ABOUT THE BOX, VINCENT. I WANT TO KNOW.

ALL RIGHT, I'LL TELL YOU. BUT YOU HAVE TO KNOW: IT'S NOT A "BOX"; IT'S A PUZZLE.

IT'S AN INSIDIOUS STORY, REALLY. QUITE LIKE THE DAMNED MICROBACTERIUM THAT'S KILLING ME. I WAS IN MEXICO...

I CONTRACTED THE DISEASE SOME YEARS BACK. I CAN'T SAY WHEN-- 2 TO 10 YEARS BEFORE MY BALLS FELL OFF, I GUESS. I WAS A STUDENT--STUDYING INDIAN CULTURE. THERE WERE JUNGLES. I LIKED IT, DESPITE THE HEAT AND THE WET AIR. I FELT ALIVE THERE, MARY, LIKE I HADN'T BEFORE OR SINCE.

I MUST HAVE COME IN CONTACT WITH SOMEONE WHO HAD THE BACILLUS. WHO KNOWS?


AT ANY RATE, AT THE TIME I NOTICED THE FIRST LESIONS ON MY SKIN, THE NODULES ON MY NOSE, I DISCOVERED... SOMETHING ELSE.

WHAT DID YOU DISCOVER?
HIS SKIN IS TAUT, SCALY, HARSH BENEATH THE SOFT WHORLS OF HER FINGERTIPS. HE WONDERS WHAT THE SENSATION MUST BE LIKE FOR HER.

I WAS TOLD ABOUT, AND HAD READ OF A MAN NAMED LeMARCHAND OF SOMETHING THAT HE HAD DESIGNED--LAMENT CONFIGURATIONS. AND I KNEW THAT I WAS SAVED.
HE CANNOT QUITE RECALL THE SMELL OF THE PLACE, THE FEEL OF HARD WOOD AT HIS BACK, OF THE LIQUOR SITTING HEAVY IN HIS GUT. BUT HE REMEMBERS THE RUSH OF HOPE THAT FLOODED OVER HIM.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN "SAVED"? YOU'RE NOT AN IGNORANT MAN. MY GOD! YOU HAD TO KNOW THAT HANSEN'S DISEASE CAN BE ARRESTED WITH TREATMENT! WHY DIDN'T YOU GET HELP?

NOT THE KIND OF HELP I TRULY NEEDED. WHY MERELY ARREST THE DISEASE WHEN I CAN RID MYSELF OF IT, ENTIRELY? I HAD TO HAVE THIS, MY LAMENT CONFIGURATION!
AND NOW, THE SHADE OF ONCE HANDS, OF FINGERS THAT WERE, WRITHE ABOUT THE SURFACE OF THE PUZZLE.

THERE ARE NO SULFA DRUGS IN THE PLACES I HAD TO SEARCH. AND ALL THE WHILE THE LEPROSY KEPT PACE WITH ME.

AND WHEN IT LOOKED HOPELESS, WHEN IT LOOKED AS IF I HAD WASTED WHAT WAS LEFT OF MY TIME, I DISCOVERED THAT LeMARCHAND HAD ONCE LIVED HERE--AT THE CENTER! I DON'T KNOW WHY OR FOR HOW LONG HE WAS HERE; I ONLY KNEW THAT HE HAD BEEN HERE, HAD WORKED HERE. SO I CAME.

AND I FOUND MY LeMARCHAND CUBE.

BUT, BY THEN, MY HANDS WERE USELESS! I CAN'T WORK THE PUZZLE!
HIS GAZE BELONGS TO HER NOW. TO HER OWN HANDS. VINCENT STARES NOT AT HIS PRECIOUS CONFIGURATION, BUT AT A NEW PRIZE: THE SLIM, BEAUTIFUL FINGERS THAT ARE POISED ABOVE THE PUZZLE.

HOW, VINCENT? HOW CAN THIS HELP YOU? IT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE.
HE SEES HER TOUCHING THE EDGES, THE GROOVED SURFACE.

THE PUZZLE IS A KEY, MARY. IT OPENS A DOOR TO ANOTHER PLACE!

THERE ARE... PEOPLE THERE. CENOBITES. AND THEY CAN REPAIR MY BODY, PERHAPS GIVE ME A NEW ONE!

I DON'T BELIEVE YOU, VINCENT. IT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE. IT'S A FANTASY.
AND STILL HE CLINGS TO THE MEMORY OF HIS BODY; OF PLEASURE AND OF PAIN.

IT'S NOT A FANTASY. IT'S REAL.
BUT IT IS SO HARD TO HOLD ON.

I DON'T BELIEVE YOU.
I DON'T CARE IF YOU BELIEVE ME. JUST HELP ME WORK THE PUZZLE. JUST HELP ME. PLEASE?
OH, IF HE CAN JUST HOLD ON...

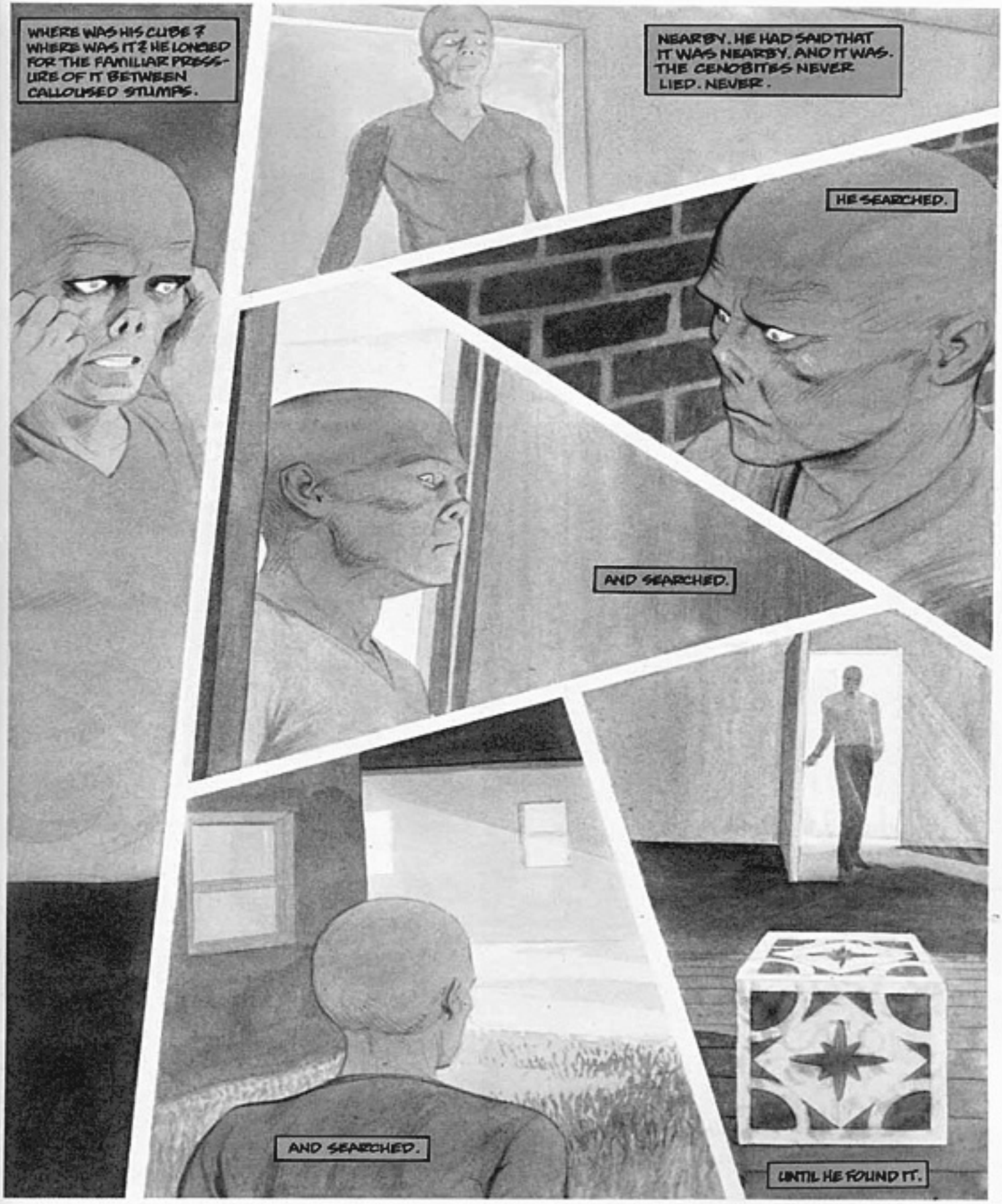
I'LL HELP YOU.

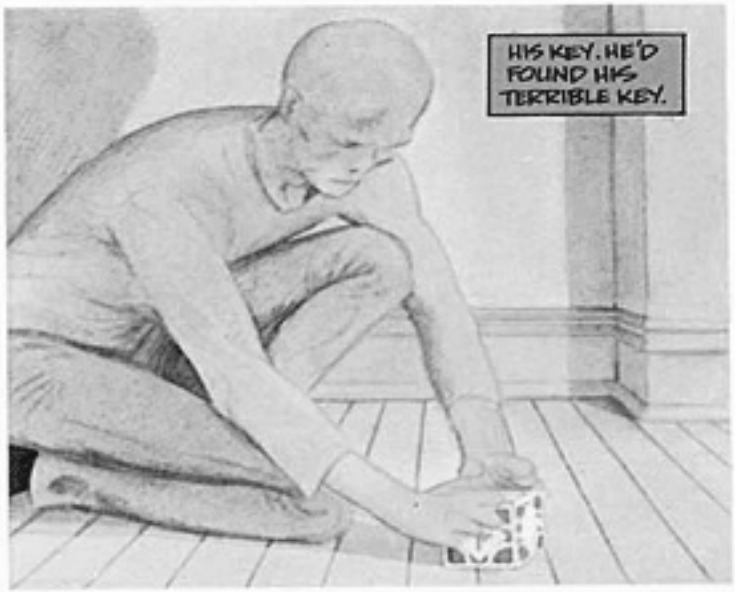
A ROOM. WHERE NO ONE WILL INTERRUPT US.
WHERE ARE WE GOING, VINCENT?
HE IMAGINES HOW THE COOL AIR MUST FEEL AGAINST HER FACE.
HERE.
I'VE NEVER BEEN DOWN HERE. I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW THIS WAS HERE.
HE PRETENDS HE KNOWS HOW THE SOLES OF HER FEET PRESS AGAINST THE INSIDES OF HER SHOES.
OH, IT'S A BIG PLACE, THE CENTER. THERE ARE PLACES HERE EVEN I'VE NEVER SEEN. NOW, HAVE A SEAT THERE ON THE FLOOR.
HE THINKS HE CAN RECALL THE QUICK PAIN OF LIGHT ON SENSITIVE EYES.
THAT'S RIGHT. TAKE IT IN YOUR HANDS. HOLD IT LIKE THAT. YES. YES.
THE FLOOR IS HARSH THROUGH THE MESH OF HER HOSE, COOL AND DAMP AGAINST HER KNEES.
THAT'S RIGHT. PRESS THERE. FEEL THE JOINTS, HOW THEY MOVE ONE AGAINST THE OTHER?
TWIST THERE. TWIST! FEEL IT MOVE!
THE MATERIAL MOVES SMOOTHLY BENEATH HER TOUCH, AS IF OF ITS OWN VOLITION. VINCENT GUIDES HER ALONG.
SOMETHING'S HAPPENING!
TURN IT! TURN IT!
IN SPITE OF THE DISEASE, OF THE GREAT TENSION, VINCENT CAN ALMOST RECALL WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO FEEL ANOTHER IN HIS LIVING EMBRACE.
YES! YES!
AND SOON, HE MAY ONCE MORE KNOW THE FEEL OF ONE TEXTURE AGAINST ANOTHER.

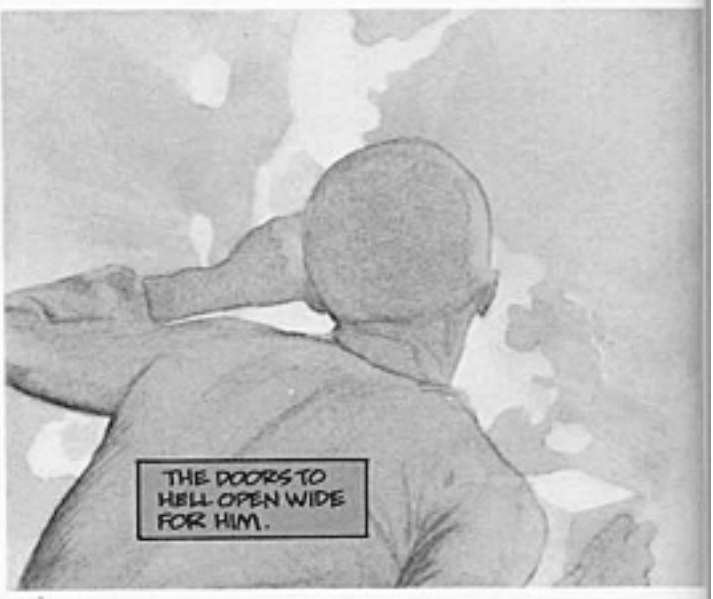
DARK FIGURES STRIDE OUT OF THE LIGHT, BUT NOT THE ANGEL-LIKE CREATURES WHOM MARY WOULD HAVE EXPECTED EVEN HAD SHE BELIEVED VINCENT.
AH, SWEET VINCENT. I SEE YOU HAVE BROUGHT US ANOTHER. AREN'T YOU THE DEAR ONE?
HA HA! HOW HER PRETTY HAIR FEELS IN MY STRONG HANDS! IMAGINE, SWEET VINCENT! IMAGINE!
HE DOES IMAGINE.

VINCENT! WHAT'S HAPPENING? WHAT IS HE DOING TO ME ?
OH, MY! DIDN'T DEAR VINCENT TELL YOU? HE HAS A DEAL WITH US, MY SWEET!
VINCENT! NO!
I HAVE TO DO THIS, MARY! THEY'LL MAKE ME ONE OF THEM! I'LL BECOME A CENOBITE NEVER TO SICKEN. NEVER TO DIE.
THEY'LL TAKE ME IN IF I BRING THEM... PEOPLE. LIKE YOU.
YES, SUCH A DEAL WITH SWEET VINCENT! HE BRINGS US FLESH TO PUNISH INTO SUBMISSION AND, OH, SOME DAY, SOME DAY, WE BRING HIM AMONG OUR NUMBERS.
REMIND ME TO THANK THE LITTLE BACILLUS ROD THAT FLOATS IN HIS STINKING BODY.
AND NOW...

HIS ORDERS SCREAM, AS DOES MARY. THE FLESH IS PUNISHED.
AND IN EVERY BELLOW...
IN EVERY ANGUISHED NOISE...
VINCENT TRIES TO FEEL, TO FOLLOW MARY'S PAIN.
HOLD. I SEE SOMETHING HERE. SOMETHING.
SOMETHING...
HE WHISPERS TO HER.
THE LAMENT CONFIGURATION MAKES A WONDERFUL ARC, DARK DROPLETS FOLLOWING ITS FLIGHT.
MY PUZZLE! WHERE IS IT?
NEVER FEAR. IT'S NEARBY.


WHERE WAS HIS CUBE? WHERE WAS IT? HE LONGED FOR THE FAMILIAR PRESSURE OF IT BETWEEN CALLOUSED STUMPS.
NEARBY. HE HAD SAID THAT IT WAS NEARBY. AND IT WAS. THE CENOBITES NEVER LIED. NEVER.
HE SEARCHED.
AND SEARCHED.
AND SEARCHED.
UNTIL HE FOUND IT.


HIS KEY. HE'D FOUND HIS TERRIBLE KEY.


THE DOORS TO HELL OPEN WIDE FOR HIM.

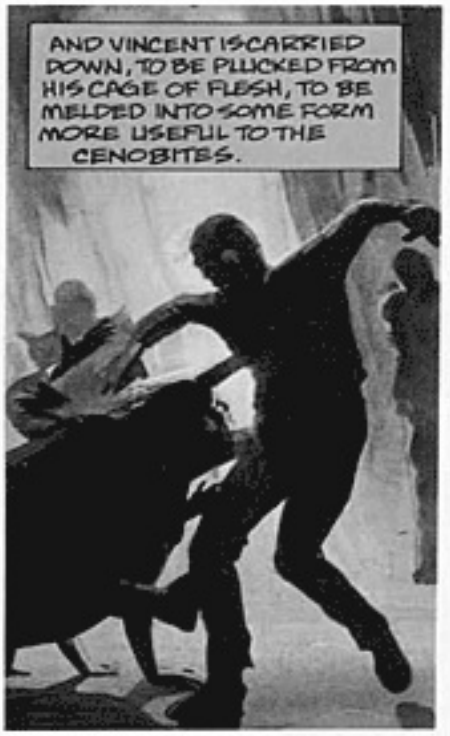
MY, MY, VINCENT. SO SOON? WHAT HAVE YOU BROUGHT US FOR ENTER-TAINMENT THIS TIME?

BUT I HAVEN'T CALLED YOU! I HAVEN'T WORKED THE PUZZ...

ARCHITECT
LeMARCH

THE ENTIRE CENTER. IT'S A LAMENT CONFIGURATION, WHEN NEGOTIATED JUST SO.

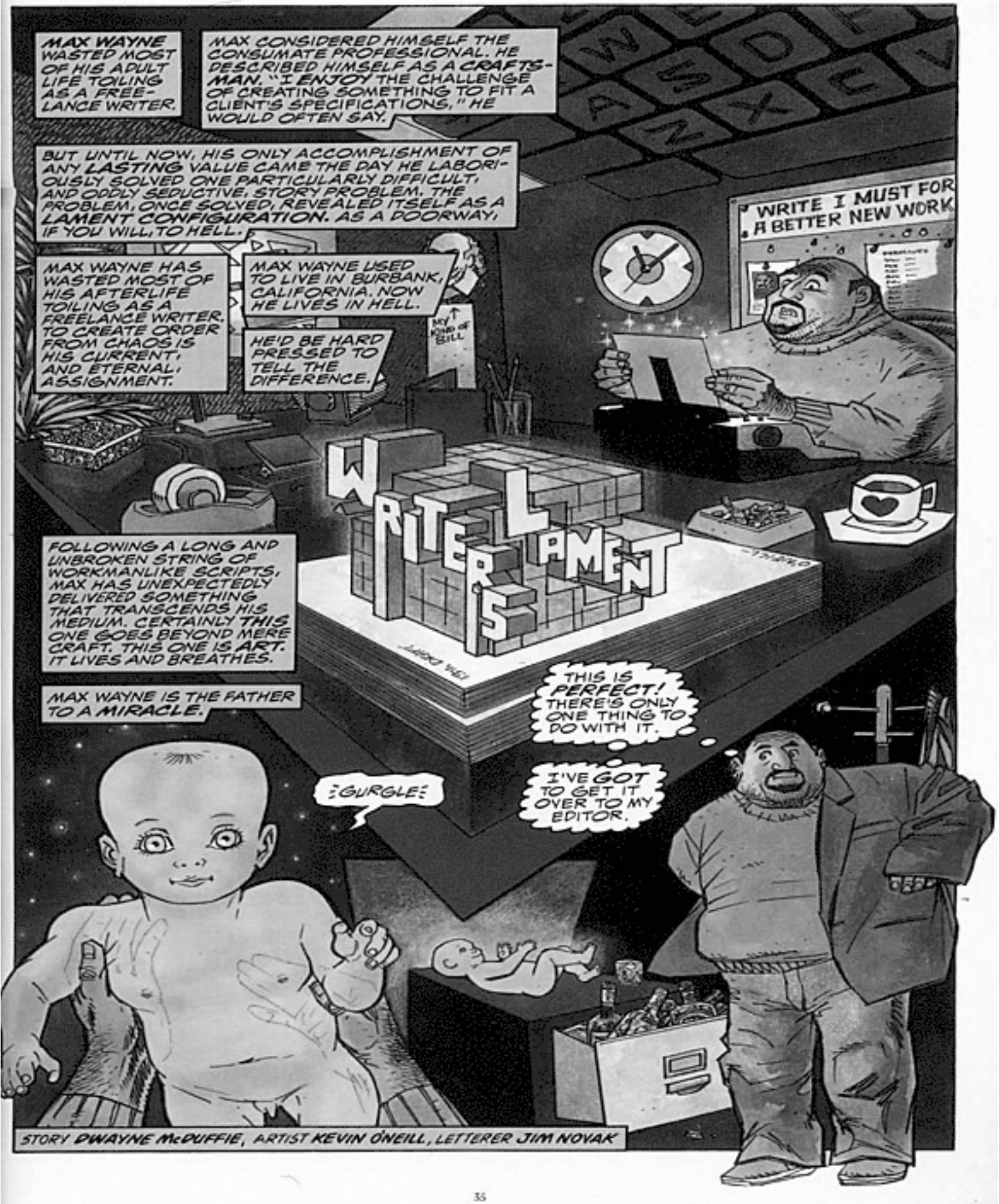
AND MARY IS HERE, VINCENT. SHE TURNED OUT TO BE QUITE MORE MALLEABLE THAN WE HAD DARED HOPE.


AND VINCENT IS CARRIED DOWN, TO BE PLUCKED FROM HIS CAGE OF FLESH, TO BE MELDED INTO SOME FORM MORE USEFUL TO THE CENOBITES.

AH! WHAT FINGERS! WHAT BEAUTIFUL FINGERS!

The End

MIGNOLA


MAX WAYNE WASTED MOST OF HIS ADULT LIFE TOILING AS A FREE-LANCE WRITER.
MAX CONSIDERED HIMSELF THE CONSUMATE PROFESSIONAL. HE DESCRIBED HIMSELF AS A CRAFTSMAN. "I ENJOY THE CHALLENGE OF CREATING SOMETHING TO FIT A CLIENT'S SPECIFICATIONS," HE WOULD OFTEN SAY.
BUT UNTIL NOW, HIS ONLY ACCOMPLISHMENT OF ANY LASTING VALUE CAME THE DAY HE LABORIOUSLY SOLVED ONE PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT, AND ODDLY SEDUCTIVE, STORY PROBLEM. THE PROBLEM, ONCE SOLVED, REVEALED ITSELF AS A LAMENT CONFIGURATION. AS A DOORWAY, IF YOU WILL, TO HELL.
MAX WAYNE HAS WASTED MOST OF HIS AFTERLIFE TOILING AS A FREELANCE WRITER. TO CREATE ORDER FROM CHAOS IS HIS CURRENT, AND ETERNAL, ASSIGNMENT.
MAX WAYNE USED TO LIVE IN BURBANK, CALIFORNIA. NOW HE LIVES IN HELL.
HE'D BE HARD PRESSED TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE.
WRITE I MUST FOR A BETTER NEW WORK
WRITER'S LAMENT
FOLLOWING A LONG AND UNBROKEN STRING OF WORKMANLIKE SCRIPTS, MAX HAS UNEXPECTEDLY DELIVERED SOMETHING THAT TRANSCENDS HIS MEDIUM. CERTAINLY THIS ONE GOES BEYOND MERE CRAFT. THIS ONE IS ART. IT LIVES AND BREATHES.
MAX WAYNE IS THE FATHER TO A MIRACLE.
THIS IS PERFECT! THERE'S ONLY ONE THING TO DO WITH IT.
I'VE GOT TO GET IT OVER TO MY EDITOR.
:GURGLE:
STORY DWAYNE McDUFFIE, ARTIST KEVIN O'NEILL, LETTERER JIM NOVAK

WAI
OTHER PEOPLE HAVE BABIES TOO?

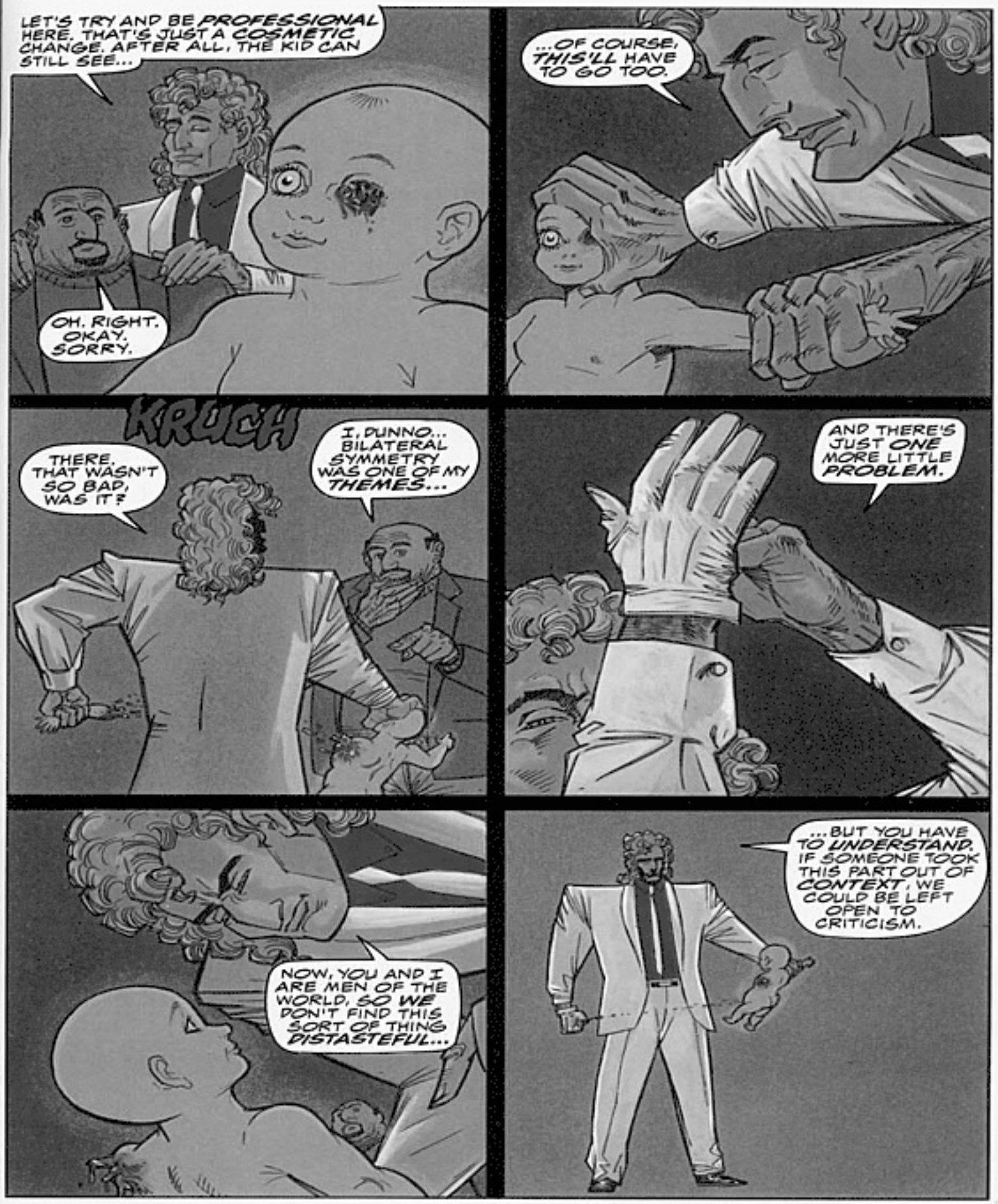
MAX? I'M READY TO SEE YOU NOW.

MAX, THIS LITTLE BOY IS A WONDERFUL PIECE OF WORK. PERFECT! I'M TELLING YOU THIS BABY'S GOT "HIT" STAMPED ALL OVER IT.

PERSONALLY, IF IT WERE UP TO ME, I WOULDN'T CHANGE A THING.

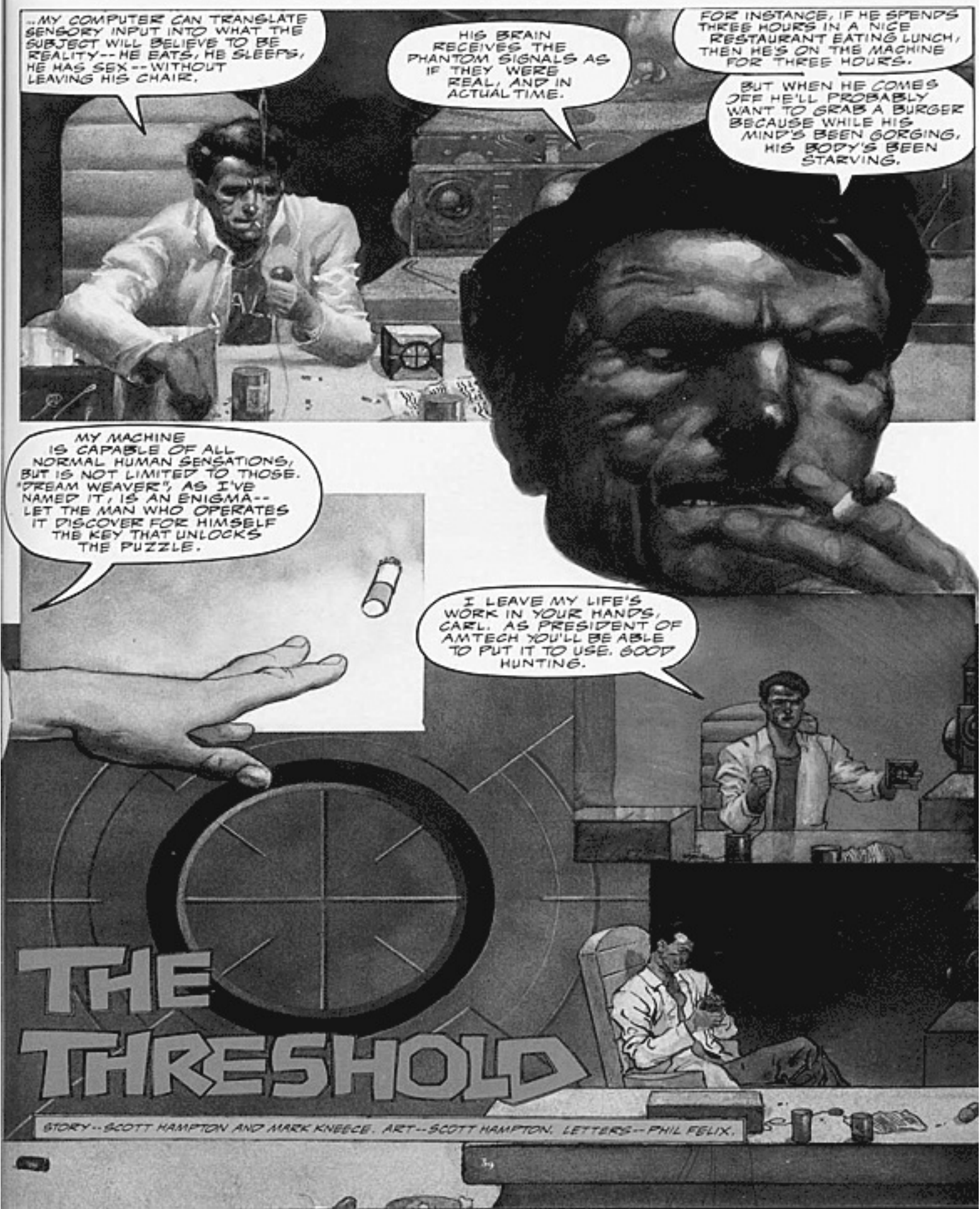
BUT I DO HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO LEVIATHAN, AND TO THE SPONSORS, AND PRESSURE GROUPS. OH. AND TO THE AUDIENCE, OF COURSE.
AND FRANKLY, SOME OF THIS MATERIAL IS POTENTIALLY... OFFENSIVE.

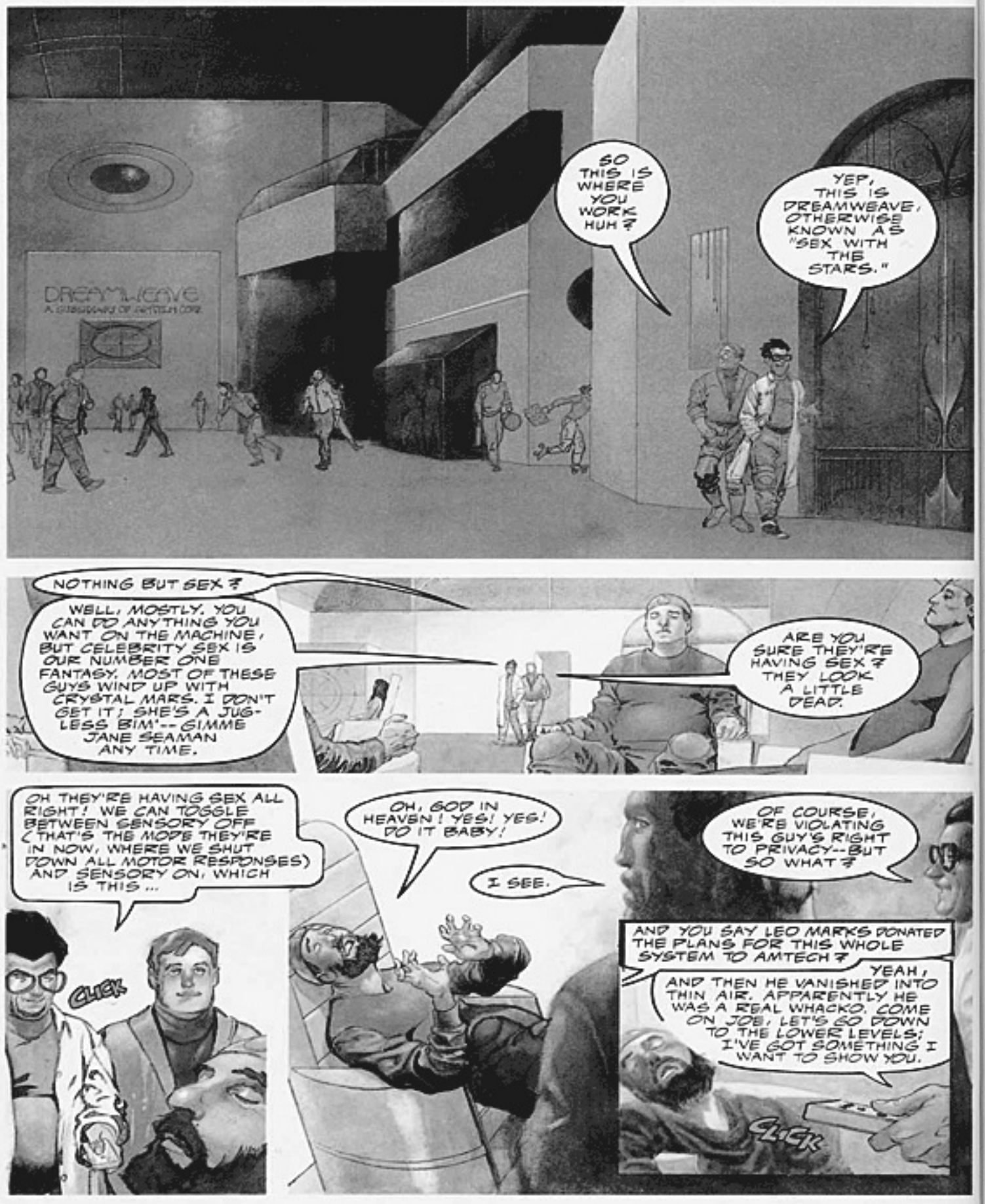
SOOOOOO..
SKLUCH
...WE'RE GOING TO HAVE TO MAKE A FEW CHANGES.
HEY! DON'T!


LET'S TRY AND BE PROFESSIONAL HERE. THAT'S JUST A COSMETIC CHANGE. AFTER ALL, THE KID CAN STILL SEE...
OH, RIGHT. OKAY. SORRY.
...OF COURSE, THIS'LL HAVE TO GO TOO.
KRUCH
THERE. THAT WASN'T SO BAD, WAS IT?
I, DUNNO... BILATERAL SYMMETRY WAS ONE OF MY THEMES...
AND THERE'S JUST ONE MORE LITTLE PROBLEM.
NOW, YOU AND I ARE MEN OF THE WORLD, SO WE DON'T FIND THIS SORT OF THING DISTASTEFUL...
...BUT YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND. IF SOMEONE TOOK THIS PART OUT OF CONTEXT, WE COULD BE LEFT OPEN TO CRITICISM.

WELL, I'M FINISHED--
--WHAT DO YOU THINK?
IT WAS GOOD BEFORE AND YOU MESSED IT ALL UP...
I THINK YOU'RE OVER-REACTING, BUT I TRY TO BE SENSITIVE TO THE ARTISTS' FEELINGS. LET ME REASSEMBLE THIS THING AND SEE IF WE CAN'T MAKE SOME COMPROMISES TOGETHER.
SKLLCH
POP!
CLICK
HERE'S ONE CHANGE THAT SOLVES ALL OF MY PROB-LEMS WITH IT.
THANKS FOR BRINGING THIS TO US, MAX. YOU'VE DONE A WONDERFUL JOB...
YOU ASSHOLE! YOU KILLED MY BABY!
...AND WE HOPE YOU CAN DO SOME MORE WORK FOR US SOMETIME.
COULD I!? THAT WOULD BE GREAT. I'VE GOT A COUPLE OF NEW IDEAS I CAN DEVELOP...
MAX WAYNE CONSIDERS HIMSELF A CONSUMATE PROFESSION-AL. AS SUCH, HE'S LEARNED FROM HIS EXPERIENCE.
FROM NOW ON, HE WON'T PUT ANY HEART INTO THESE BABIES IN THE FIRST PLACE.
AND, AFTER HE'S DONE A FEW THAT WAY, HE'LL BE HARD PRESSED TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE.

The End

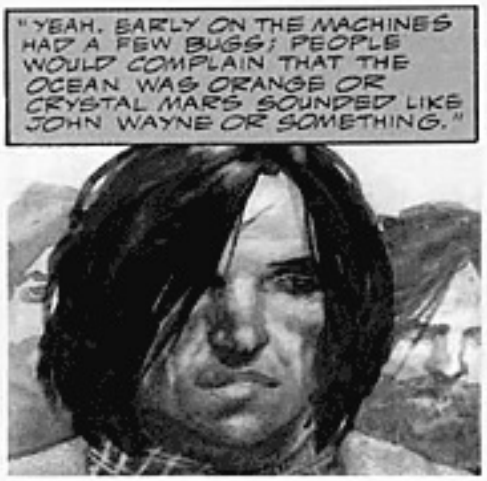

..MY COMPUTER CAN TRANSLATE SENSORY INPUT INTO WHAT THE SUBJECT WILL BELIEVE TO BE REALITY--HE EATS, HE SLEEPS, HE HAS SEX--WITHOUT LEAVING HIS CHAIR.
HIS BRAIN RECEIVES THE PHANTOM SIGNALS AS IF THEY WERE REAL, AND IN ACTUAL TIME.
FOR INSTANCE, IF HE SPENDS THREE HOURS IN A NICE RESTAURANT EATING LUNCH, THEN HE'S ON THE MACHINE FOR THREE HOURS.
BUT WHEN HE COMES OFF HE'LL PROBABLY WANT TO GRAB A BURGER BECAUSE WHILE HIS MIND'S BEEN GORGING, HIS BODY'S BEEN STARVING.
MY MACHINE IS CAPABLE OF ALL NORMAL HUMAN SENSATIONS, BUT IS NOT LIMITED TO THOSE. "DREAM WEAVER", AS I'VE NAMED IT, IS AN ENIGMA--LET THE MAN WHO OPERATES IT DISCOVER FOR HIMSELF THE KEY THAT UNLOCKS THE PUZZLE.
I LEAVE MY LIFE'S WORK IN YOUR HANDS, CARL. AS PRESIDENT OF AMTECH YOU'LL BE ABLE TO PUT IT TO USE. GOOD HUNTING.
THE THRESHOLD
STORY--SCOTT HAMPTON AND MARK KNEECE. ART--SCOTT HAMPTON. LETTERS--PHIL FELIX.


DREAMWEAVE
SO THIS IS WHERE YOU WORK HUH?
YEP, THIS IS DREAMWEAVE, OTHERWISE KNOWN AS "SEX WITH THE STARS."
NOTHING BUT SEX?
WELL, MOSTLY. YOU CAN DO ANYTHING YOU WANT ON THE MACHINE, BUT CELEBRITY SEX IS OUR NUMBER ONE FANTASY. MOST OF THESE GUYS WIND UP WITH CRYSTAL MARS. I DON'T GET IT; SHE'S A JUGLESS BIM'--GIMME JANE SEAMAN ANY TIME.
ARE YOU SURE THEY'RE HAVING SEX? THEY LOOK A LITTLE DEAD.
OH THEY'RE HAVING SEX ALL RIGHT! WE CAN TOGGLE BETWEEN SENSORY OFF (THAT'S THE MODE THEY'RE IN NOW, WHERE WE SHUT DOWN ALL MOTOR RESPONSES) AND SENSORY ON, WHICH IS THIS...
CLICK
OH, GOD IN HEAVEN! YES! YES! DO IT BABY!
I SEE.
OF COURSE, WE'RE VIOLATING THIS GUY'S RIGHT TO PRIVACY--BUT SO WHAT?
AND YOU SAY LEO MARKS DONATED THE PLANS FOR THIS WHOLE SYSTEM TO AMTECH?
YEAH, AND THEN HE VANISHED INTO THIN AIR. APPARENTLY HE WAS A REAL WHACKO. COME ON JOE, LET'S GO DOWN TO THE LOWER LEVELS; I'VE GOT SOMETHING I WANT TO SHOW YOU.
CLICK

...NOW WE'RE ENTERING THE HEART OF THE BEAST. THIS IS WHERE HISTORY GETS MADE.

JOE, I'D LIKE YOU TO MEET MY GOOD BUDDY, BOB.

BOB HERE RESPONDED TO ONE OF OUR ADS FOR GUINEA PIGS ABOUT A YEAR AGO, DIDN'T YOU, BOB?
GUINEA PIGS?


"YEAH. EARLY ON THE MACHINES HAD A FEW BUGS; PEOPLE WOULD COMPLAIN THAT THE OCEAN WAS ORANGE OR CRYSTAL MARS SOUNDED LIKE JOHN WAYNE OR SOMETHING."

"NOTHING DRASTIC, BUT WE NEEDED TO DO SOME FINE TUNING, SO WE GOT IN A FEW VOLUNTEERS--DERELICTS, MOSTLY, LIKE BOB HERE. IT WAS GOOD PAY."

"THE DRUNKS AND COKE-HEADS WERE SUPPOSED TO SPEND A WEEK IN DETOX AT THE HOSPITAL TO CLEAR AWAY THE COB-WEBS. THAT WAS THE ONLY SNAG. HALF OF 'EM SAID "NO THANKS"--THEY'D BEEN UP THERE BEFORE."
"BOB ALMOST BACKED OUT, BUT WHEN I SAW EVERY-BODY LEAVING I PANICKED AND OFFERED HIM DOUBLE RATE; HE WAS THE BEST OF THE BUNCH AND WE NEEDED HIM."

"AND HE WENT FOR IT?"
"YOU BET HE DID. YOU WOULD, TOO; IT WAS 40,000 CREDITS."
"HOLY SHIT! SO WHAT HAPPENED?"

"MAJOR SCREW UP. BOB HERE WAS SUPPOSED TO BE CATCHING SOME WAVES, BUT THE COMPUTER GOT CONFUSED AND PLOPPED HIM DOWN ON THE SIDE OF A MOUNTAIN IN HAWAII RIDING A LAVA FLOW. CAN YOU IMAGINE?"
"OF COURSE, HE LOST IT INSTANTLY. HE WASN'T A VERY GOOD SURFER, I SUPPOSE. HE STAYED ON THE MACHINE ALL NIGHT."
"ALL NIGHT?!"
"YEAH, SAM, ONE OF THE OPERATORS ON THE LATE SHIFT WAS VERY LAX... ONE TIME HE FORGOT TO REPLACE THE FILTER IN THE COFFEE MAKER..."
"WAIT A MINUTE; YOU'RE TELLING ME THIS GUY FLOATED AROUND IN MOLTEN LAVA--? FOR HOURS?"
"YEAH. IT WAS A TOUGH BREAK."
OH, MAN! SO YOU JUST KEEP HIM HERE?
SURE. HIS MIND'S BLOWN. HE CAN'T BE OF ANY USE TO ANYONE ANYMORE, SO I KEEP HIM AROUND. BOB'S MY PET, AREN'T YOU, BOY? I LIKE TO REALLY GIVE HIM SOME FUN--WATCH THIS!
WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
I'M MAKING HIM SCREW A HORNET'S NEST. WANNA HEAR?
CLICK
POWER
SENSORY

GOT A PAIR OF LUNGS, DON'T HE?
LISTEN, TOM, I'M ALMOST AFRAID TO ASK, BUT JUST EXACTLY HOW MUCH PAIN HAS THIS GUY HAD? I MEAN, WHAT ALL HAVE YOU PUT HIM THROUGH?
CLICK
HMMM. WELL, LET'S SEE: HE WAS EATEN ALIVE BY ANTS ALL LAST WEEK; HE WAS GANG RAPED ONCE; I'VE DROPPED HIM FROM THE TWIN TOWERS; DROWNED HIM, CRUSHED HIS BALLS-- YOU NAME IT.
HOLY SHIT!
CHILD'S PLAY. WE'VE ONLY SCRAPED THE SURFACE. SO FAR I'VE ONLY BEEN ABLE TO COME UP WITH STUFF LIKE FIRE, ANTS, SNOW, ETC.
"BUT NOW, BY CROSS CIRCUITING, I'VE CREATED WHAT I THINK IS A LOOP. AND, IF I'M RIGHT, THE COMPUTER WILL PICK UP BOB'S REACTION, HIS RESPONSE TO STIMULATION, AND FEED IT BACK TO HIM ALONG WITH THE INITIAL STIMULUS."
"BOB PICKS UP THE STRENGTHENED SIGNAL, RESPONDS, THE COMPUTER PICKS UP THE NEW RESPONSE, ADDS IT TO THE SIGNAL... SEE WHAT I'M SAYING?"
"KIND OF."
"LOOK. SAY AN UGLY MAN IS STANDING IN FRONT OF A MIRROR. HE SEES HIS REFLECTION AND GRIMACES AT HIS OWN UGLINESS, MAKING HIMSELF UGLIER."
"SEEING THIS HE LETS HIS MOUTH HANG OPEN IN DISGUST, BUT THAT JUST MAKES HIM MORE DISGUSTING. IF HE COULD KEEP IT UP, HE'D BECOME UGLIER THAN UGLY, INFINITE UGLINESS."
THAT'S WHAT I'M HOPING FOR WITH BOB. IF I'M RIGHT, THE PAIN WILL GROW AND GROW UNTIL IT BECOMES-- WHO KNOWS WHAT.
THAT'S WHAT I WANT TO FIND OUT: WHAT LIES BEYOND PAIN.
WHAT DOES PAIN BECOME AFTER YOU CROSS THE THRESHOLD?

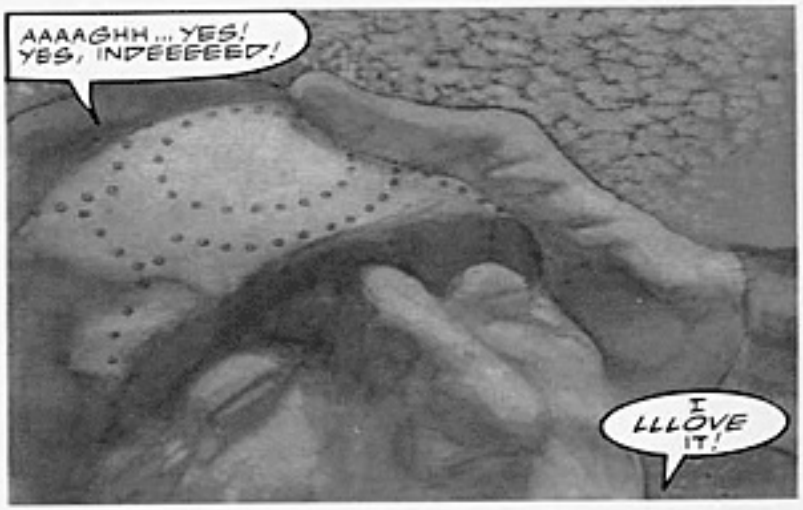
COME ON, ERN. HILLBILLY HEAVEN CLOSES IN FIFTEEN MINUTES!
RESTRICTED KEEP THIS MO
HOLD YOUR PEE, DAVE.
HEY, BUDDY, WE'RE GOING NOW.
O.K. I'LL LOCK UP ON MY WAY OUT.
WELL, BOB, IN A FEW SECONDS YOU AND I ARE GOING TO MAKE A LITTLE HISTORY. YOU UP FOR THAT? YOU GET YOUR NAME IN ALL THE SCIENCE BOOKS AND I WIN THE NOBEL. EVERYBODY WINS.
CLICK
CLICKETY CLICK
CLICK
WE'LL START WITH JUST A LITTLE PIN PRICK THIS TIME. THERE, NOW ALL I HAVE TO DO IS THROW THIS LITTLE SWITCH AND... VOILA!
CLICK
CRRR
RAAACKKKSHHSKK
YAAAAAAGGHH!!

TOM, ISN'T IT? MY NAME'S LEO...

I'D LIKE TO OFFER MY CONGRATULATIONS. I HADN'T EXPECTED ANYONE TO SOLVE MY DREAMWEAVE PUZZLE SO QUICKLY.
GYAAH... NNGGH... GLIMPH...

AND SO EFFORTLESSLY. I MUST ADMIT YOU PUT ME COMPLETELY IN THE SHADE, MY FRIEND.
SAY, TOM, MIND IF I HAVE A GO? IT'S BEEN A WHILE.
NU.. NU... NNGGH...

THANKS.
PARDON ME, BOB.


AAAAGHH... YES! YES, INDEEEEED!
I LLLOVE IT!

TOM, YOU SON OF A BITCH, I'D LIKE TO SHAKE YOUR HAND.

AND WELCOME YOU TO THE FOLD.
SCCRTCHH
SNIKT
YAAAGH!

A SADIST LIKE YOU WILL BE WARMLY GREETED...

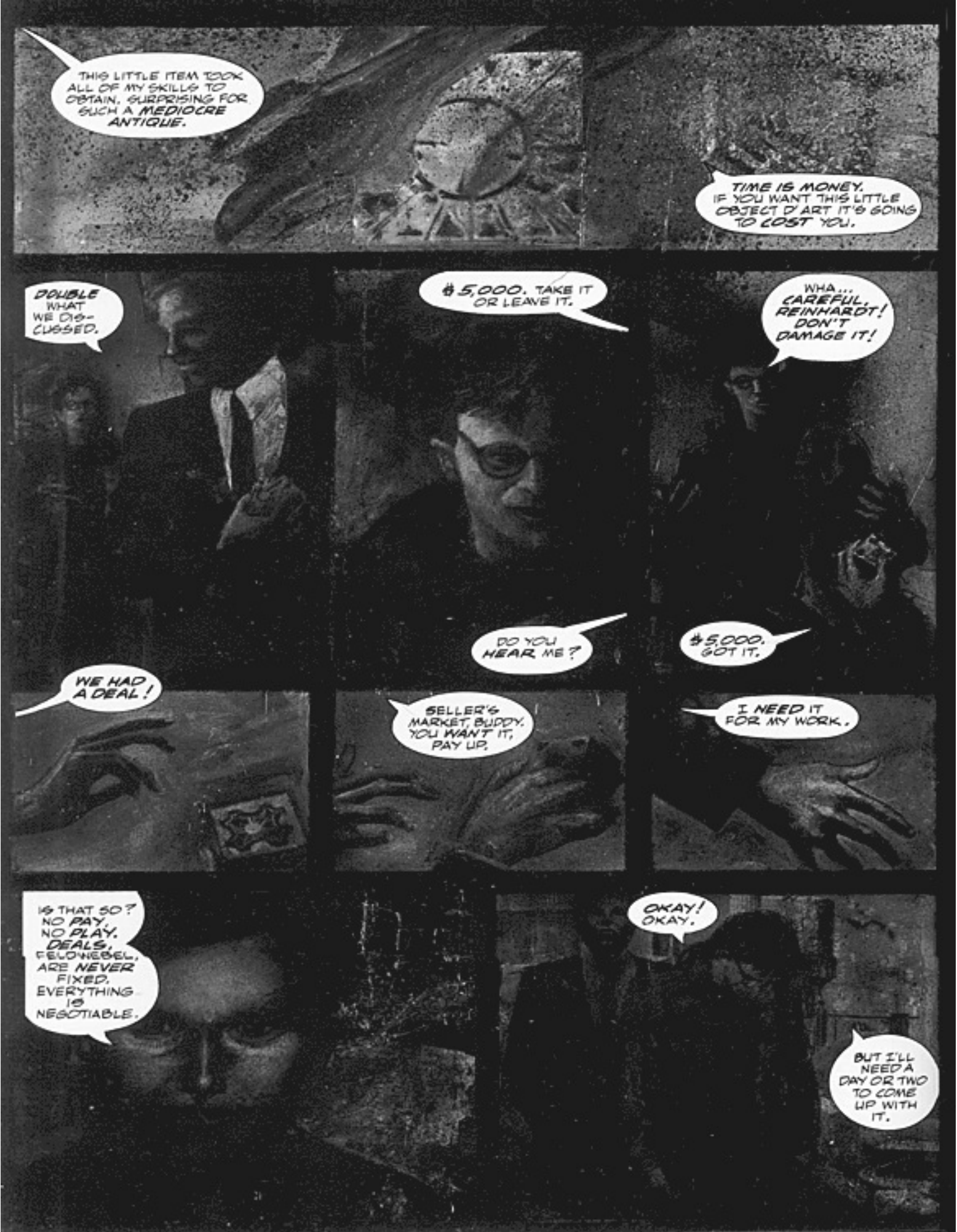
"... IN HELL."

The End

LILY GALLERY
SOHO, MANHATTAN. A DAY WHEN THE WIND HOWLS OFF THE HUDSON, CUTTING THROUGH TO THE SOUL.
PERHAPS A DUCHAMP PRINT WOULD BE WHAT--
NO. THE KOSTABI WILL BE FINE.
WELL, FELDWEBEL, WHAT A SURPRISE. WHAT BRINGS YOU HERE, BUSINESS OR PLEASURE?
GOOD. HOW WOULD YOU... EXCUSE ME.
NEITHER. (GULP.)
"THE PLEASURES of DECEPTION"
STORY BY PHILIP NUTMAN
ART BY BILL KOEB
LETTERING BY GASPAR SALADINO

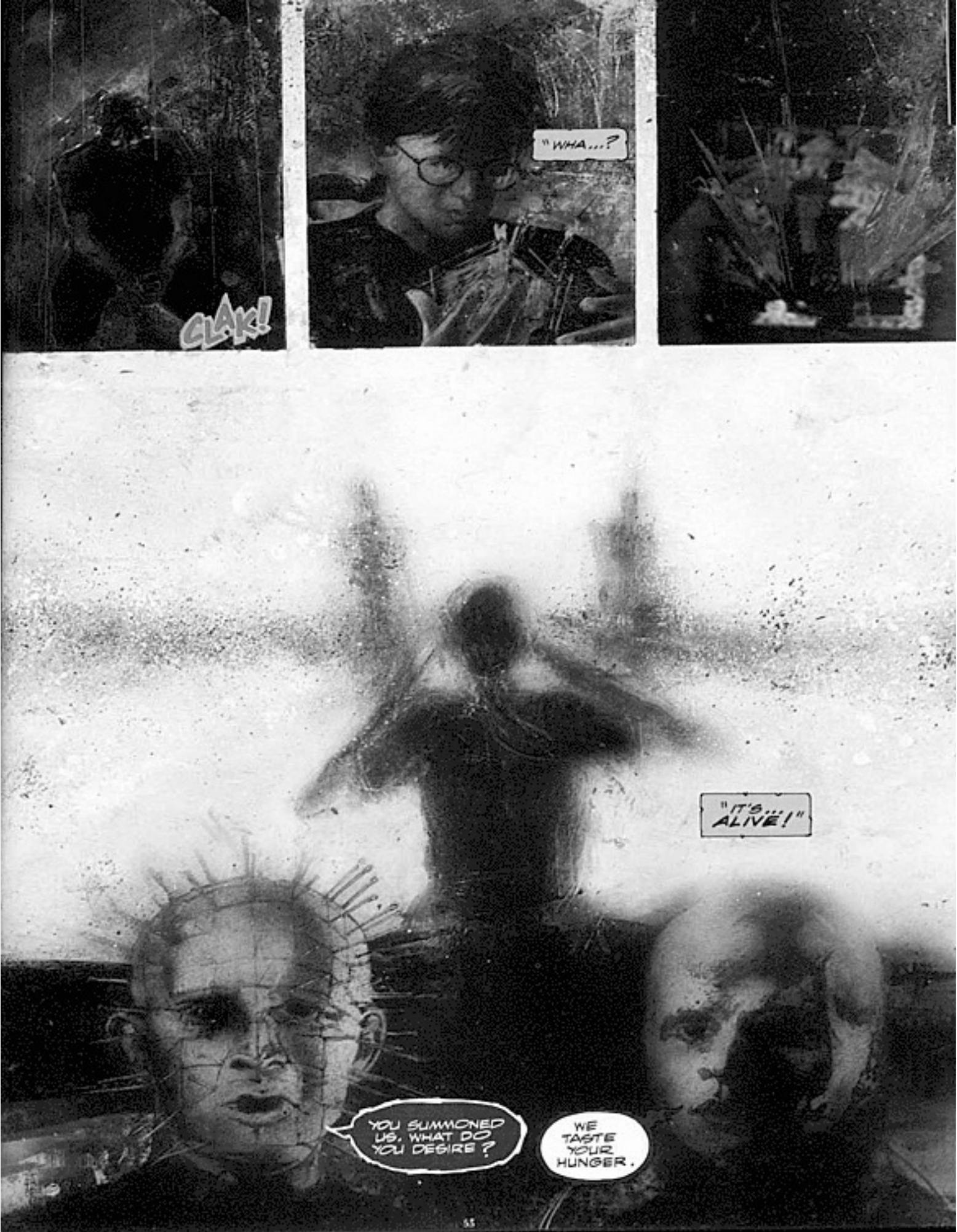
LIFE AND DEATH. WELL?
INTERESTING. SIMILAR TO YOUR EARLY WORK.
REMINISCENT OF BACON IN A WAY.
DARK. VERY DARK.
BUT I'VE NO MARKET FOR THIS AT PRESENT.
THIS TYPE OF EXPRESSIONISM'S FINANCIALLY RISKY.
COME ON, MARCELLA, YOU DID WELL OUT OF MY LAST SERIES. HAVE I EVER LET YOU DOWN?
DAVIS, THAT WAS TWO YEARS AGO. THE MARKET'S CHANGED.
YOUR WORK SELLS. EVENTUALLY. BUT I THINK IT'S SUFFERING FROM YOUR DRINKING.
YOU WON'T TAKE IT?

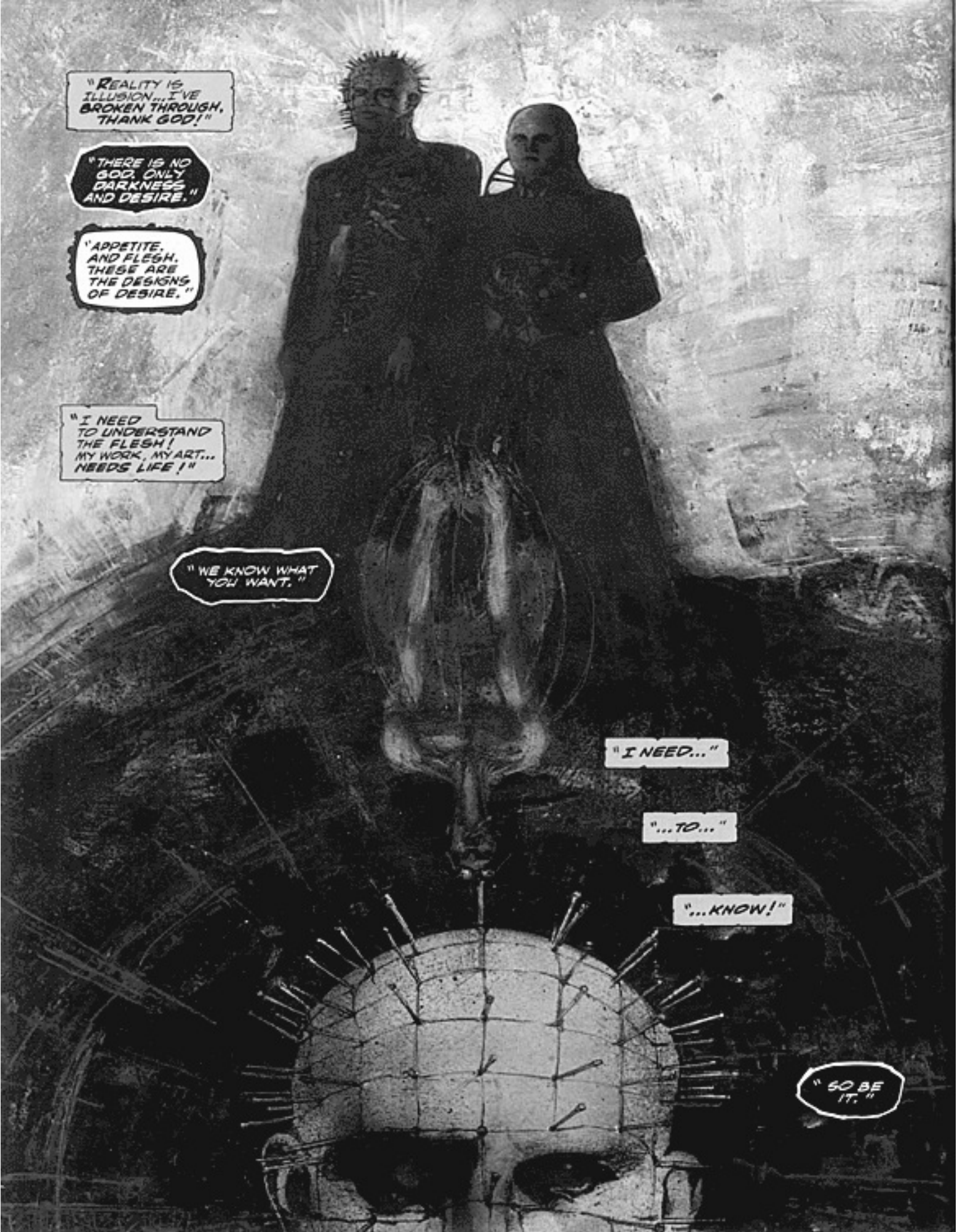
NO. I DON'T LIKE IT.
IT'S TOO DARK FOR MY TASTES RIGHT NOW. STAGNANT.
THIS IS DEPRESSING.
YOUR ALCOHOLISM'S DRAGGING YOU AND YOUR WORK DOWN. STOP IT, DAVIS, YOU'RE PISSING YOUR TALENT AWAY! (COFF! COFF! COFF!)
DO I TELL YOU HOW TO RUN YOUR LIFE?
DO I TELL YOU NOT TO SMOKE? EVEN IF YOU'RE GETTING LUNG CANCER? JUST LIKE..
YOUR FATHER? COME ON, DAVIS, HE'S BEEN DEAD OVER A YEAR. GET YOUR ACT TOGETHER. STOP LIVING IN HIS SHADOW.
LIGHTEN UP. LIVE A LITTLE.
IF YOU'RE WORKING ON A NEW SERIES, I WANT TO SEE IT, DAVIS.
I INTEND TO. I'VE GOT PLANS THAT WILL TAKE YOUR BREATH AWAY.
LATER...
I WENT TO A LOT OF TROUBLE TO LOCATE THIS.
DRINK?
NO. LET ME SEE IT.

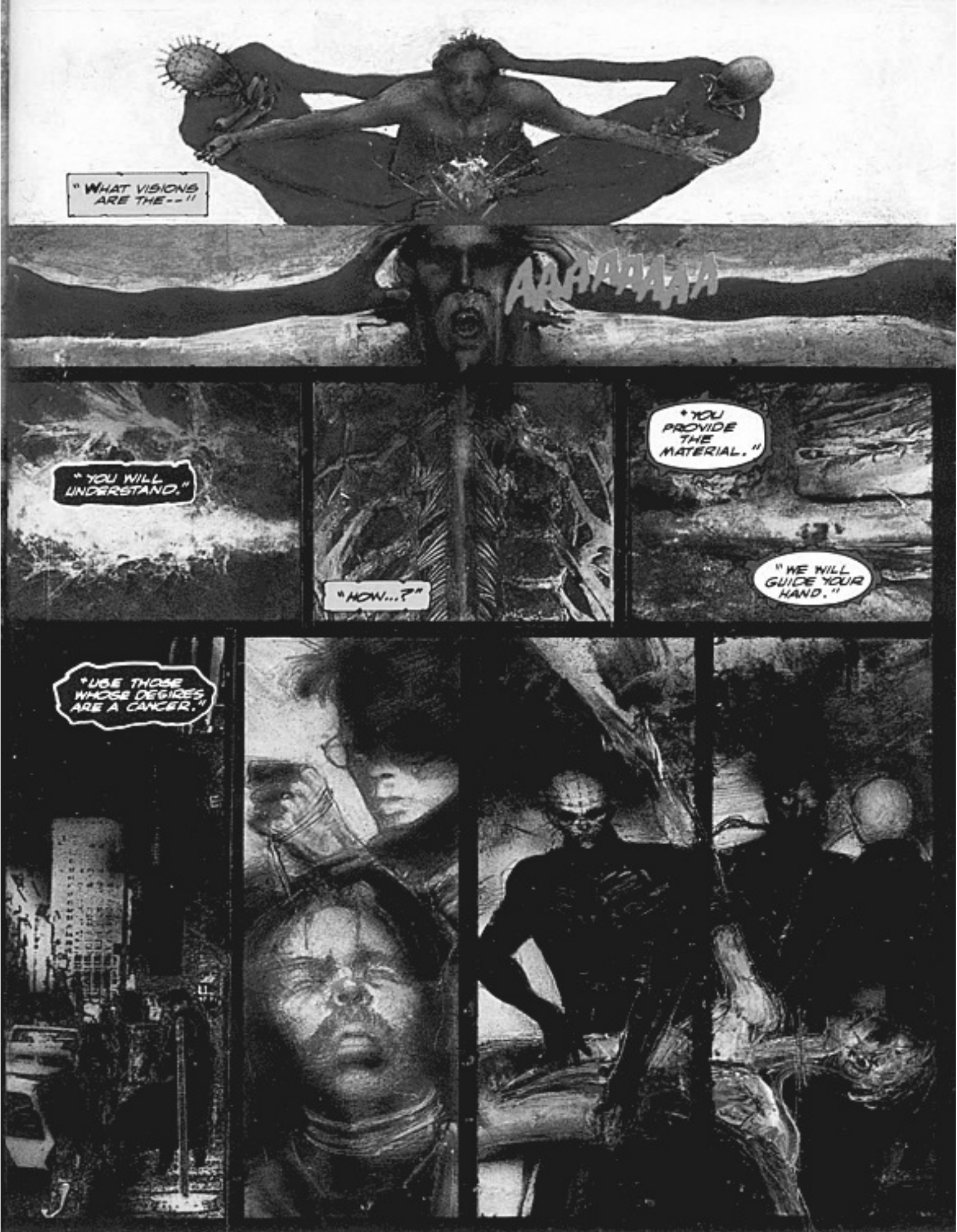

THIS LITTLE ITEM TOOK ALL OF MY SKILLS TO OBTAIN. SURPRISING FOR SUCH A MEDIOCRE ANTIQUE.
TIME IS MONEY. IF YOU WANT THIS LITTLE OBJECT D' ART IT'S GOING TO COST YOU.
DOUBLE WHAT WE DIS-CUSSED.
$5,000. TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT.
WHA... CAREFUL, REINHARDT! DON'T DAMAGE IT!
DO YOU HEAR ME?
$5,000. GOT IT.
WE HAD A DEAL!
SELLER'S MARKET, BUDDY. YOU WANT IT, PAY UP.
I NEED IT FOR MY WORK.
IS THAT SO? NO PAY, NO PLAY. DEALS, FELONIEBEL, ARE NEVER FIXED. EVERYTHING IS NEGOTIABLE.
OKAY! OKAY.
BUT I'LL NEED A DAY OR TWO TO COME UP WITH IT.

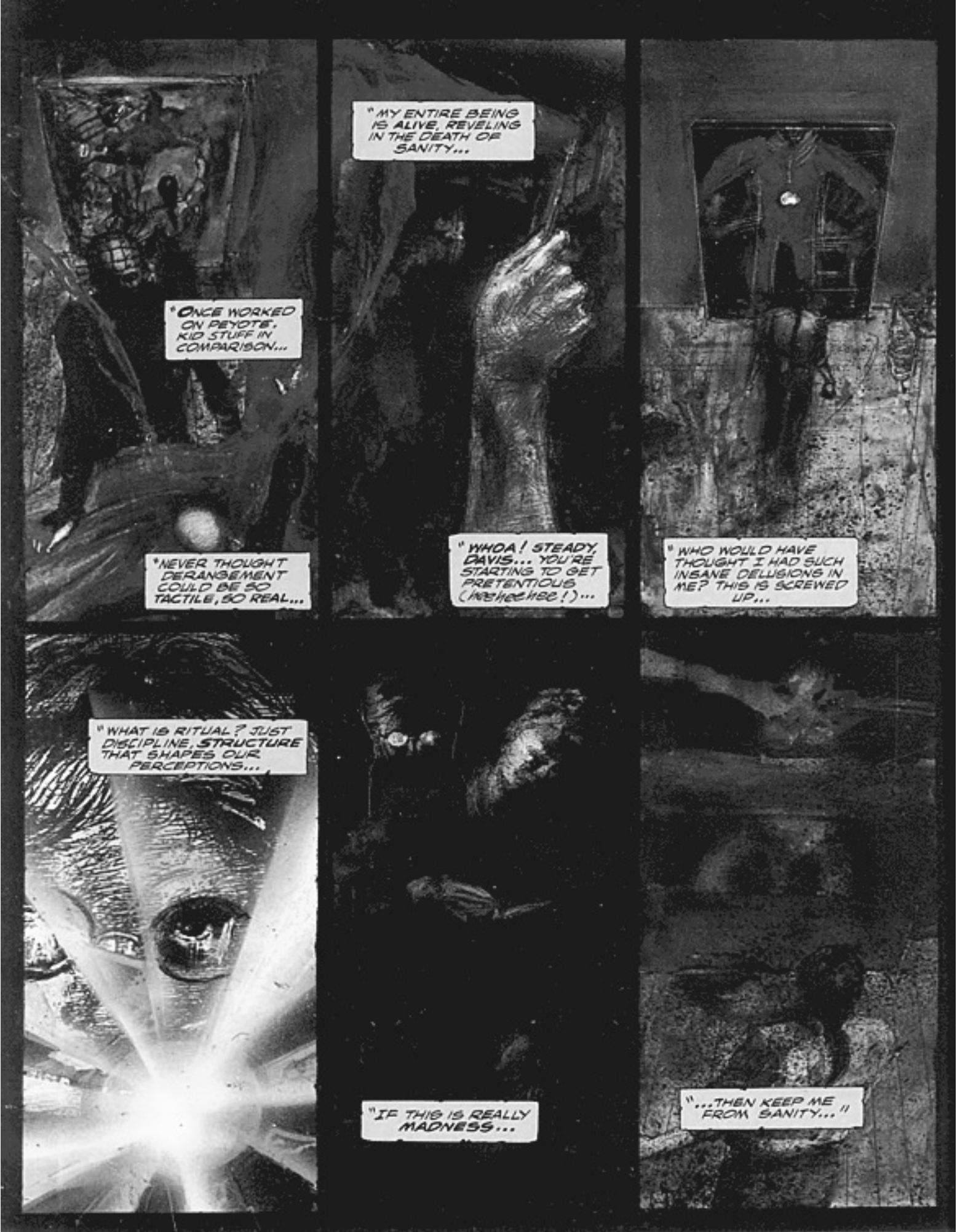
"I NEED IT. IF I HAD THE MONEY I'D PAY THE GREEDY BASTARD. BUT I CAN'T. I'VE GOT TO HAVE IT.
"DESPERATE MEANS, DESPERATE MEASURES.
"DON'T WANT TO PUT SUSPICION IN MY WAY. MAKE IT LOOK RIGHT.
"WHATEVER YOUR PLEASURE, RHEINHARDT WILL DELIVER. RHEINHARDT. THE MAN. NO SHIT.
"THIS WILL COME IN HANDY.
"I HATE THIS STUFF. MUST HAVE SNORTED HALF OF BOLIVIA ONCE.
"OH, YOU LITTLE BEAUTY.
"DON'T KNOW HOW, OR EVEN IF YOU'LL WORK. BUT I PRAY YOU DO.
"...BECAUSE RIGHT NOW YOU'RE THE ONLY HOPE I'VE GOT."

"IT HAS MANY NAMES. THE LAMENT CONFIGURATION. LE MARCHAND'S BOX. THE CUBE OF TEARS. HEARD ABOUT IT FROM A GUY WHO WENT ON A SPIRITUAL QUEST TO NEPAL, AN OCCULTIST WITH A MOHAWK.
"IT'S REPUTED TO BE AN ARCANE PLEASURE DEVICE THAT AMPLIFIES SENSATIONS..."
"HUXLEY WROTE ABOUT IT IN THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION. IT'S ORIGINS ARE VAGUE. SUPPOSEDLY THE WORK OF 18TH CENTURY ARTIST PHILLIP LE MARCHAND.
"THE GUY WROTE ME FROM SOUTH AMERICA. SAID HE'D LOCATED ONE. SAID IT INCREASED HIS PERCEPTIONS. THEN HE DISAPPEARED. NEVER HEARD FROM HIM AGAIN.
"NINE MONTHS NOT BEING ABLE TO PAINT. IT ALL WENT TO HELL WHEN THE OLD MAN DIED...
"MARCELLA'S RIGHT.
"MY WORK IS STALE.
"LIFELESS.
"STATIC. I HATE IT...
"...SPARK? IF I CAN'T PAINT, WHAT'S THE POINT IN LIVING?..."
"I'VE GOT TO FIND THE SENSUAL...


CLAK!
"WHA...?
"IT'S ALIVE!"
YOU SUMMONED US. WHAT DO YOU DESIRE?
WE TASTE YOUR HUNGER.


"REALITY IS ILLUSION... I'VE BROKEN THROUGH. THANK GOD!"
"THERE IS NO GOD. ONLY DARKNESS AND DESIRE."
"APPETITE. AND FLESH. THESE ARE THE DESIGNS OF DESIRE."
"I NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE FLESH! MY WORK, MY ART... NEEDS LIFE!"
"WE KNOW WHAT YOU WANT."
"I NEED..."
"...TO..."
"...KNOW!"
"SO BE IT."


"WHAT VISIONS ARE THE--"
AAAAAAAAA
"YOU WILL UNDERSTAND."
"HOW...?"
"YOU PROVIDE THE MATERIAL."
"WE WILL GUIDE YOUR HAND."
"USE THOSE WHOSE DESIRES ARE A CANCER."


"ONCE WORKED ON PEYOTE, KID STUFF IN COMPARISON...
"NEVER THOUGHT DERANGEMENT COULD BE SO TACTILE, SO REAL...
"MY ENTIRE BEING IS ALIVE, REVELING IN THE DEATH OF SANITY...
"WHOA! STEADY, DAVIS... YOU'RE STARTING TO GET PRETENTIOUS (Nothether!)...
"WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT I HAD SUCH INSANE DELUSIONS IN ME? THIS IS SCREWED UP...
"WHAT IS RITUAL? JUST DISCIPLINE, STRUCTURE THAT SHAPES OUR PERCEPTIONS...
"IF THIS IS REALLY MADNESS...
"...THEN KEEP ME FROM SANITY..."

"GOYA WAS RIGHT... THE SLEEP OF REASON DOES BREED MONSTERS...
"TRYING TO BALANCE THE INSANITY, THE SENSUAL DELIRIUM WITH OBJECTIVITY. BUT WHO AM I KIDDING? THIS IS A ONE WAY STREET...
"SOMETHING'S CHANGED INSIDE ME. I DON'T THINK I CAN TURN BACK, EVEN IF I WANTED TO...
"I WANT... I NEED TO UNDERSTAND ALL THIS...
"LIKE A JIGSAW, THE PIECES ARE COMING TOGETHER...
"CAN'T SEE THE WHOLE PICTURE BUT--"

TOOK ME A WHILE TO TRACK YOU DOWN. TIME TO PAY...
IN BLOOD!
WHAT IS THIS SHIT? YOU CALL THIS WORK, FELDWEBEL?
DON'T TELL ME. I KNOW. IT'S MODERN ART AND A MORON LIKE ME WOULDN'T UNDERSTAND.
"THEY CAN'T HAVE IT... IT'S MINE--"
YOU THINK I'M STUPID, FELDWEBEL? WHERE'S THE BOX, ASSHOLE?

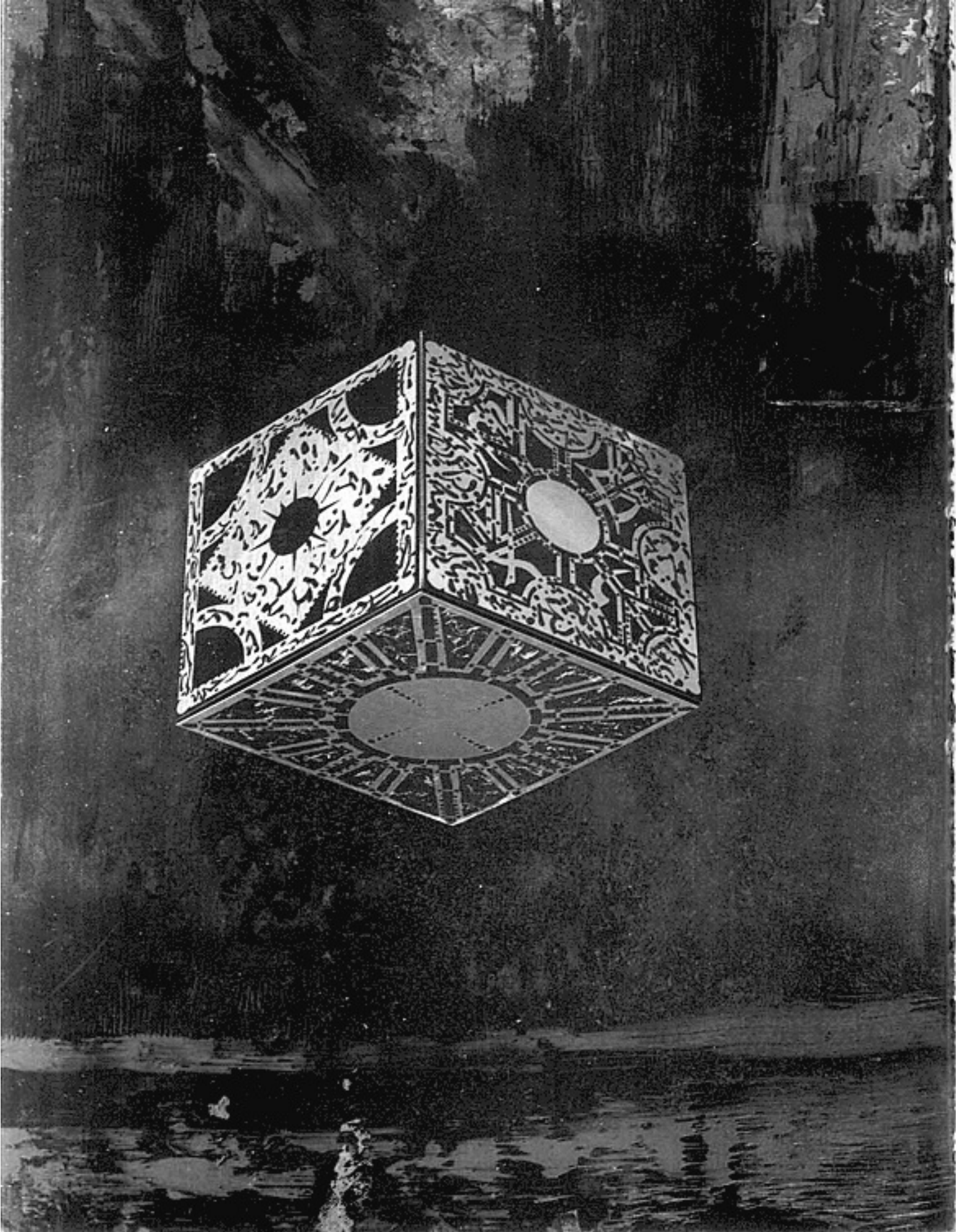
AAAHH!
"THIS...ISN'T HAPPENING... I'M TRIPPING OUT... I MUST BE...
THE LESSON CONTINUES.
MORE MATERIAL.
"...BUT WHAT IF IT IS REAL? IT--NO! IT CAN'T BE...
"...REAL?"
"I'M INSANE. PLEASE LET ME BE INSANE!
"THIS IS NOT REAL!!"
"INSANE? REAL? THERE IS NO INSANITY. REALITY IS THE FLESH."
"AND THE FLESH CAN BE REARRANGED. THEREFORE REALITY MAY CHANGE."

"OH, GOD, WHAT HAVE I UNLEASHED...?"
"GOD?--HA! YOU SOUGHT UNDERSTANDING; WE ANSWERED YOUR CALL."
"THE FLESH HAS AS MANY LEVELS AS THERE ARE DEGREES OF PERCEPTION. YOU WANTED TO EXPLORE."
"ALL THIS IS REAL?!
"YES, IT IS REAL. ALL OF IT. THE DESIGN AND EXECUTION ARE YOURS."
"TAKE IT AWAY... LET ME GO... I DON'T WANT TO KNOW...THIS IS--OH, GOD!"
"THERE CAN BE NO TURNING BACK, NO RETREAT. YOU HAVE TO LEARN. YOU WILL KNOW."
THIS IS INCREDIBLE, DAVIS. YOU'RE CERTAINLY ONTO SOMETHING..
--OR ARE YOU ON SOMETHING? (HA HA)
"LEARN? LEARN WHAT?"
"THE LESSON OF THE FLESH."
"NO, NO, NO!! I'M ENDING IT. IT'S OVER. THIS IS... IT'S TOO HORRIBLE. I..I...--"
"YOU CANNOT."
THIS IS THE WEIRDEST, MOST ORIGINAL WORK YOU'VE EVER DONE. I--

DAVIS, ARE YOU ALRIGHT?
"WHAT'S HAPPENING TO ME?!! NO...MORE!!!"
"AAAAHH!! I CAN FEEL THE CANCER INSIDE HER. SPREADING. CELLS DYING..."
WHAT'S WRONG? DAV--
DON'T TOUCH ME!!!
"...THERE IS MORE YOU MUST LEARN."
"NO, NO!! I'M INSANE! THIS IS NOT REAL!!! PLEASE, GOD, IT CAN'T BE REAL..."
"BELIEVE IT."
WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU ON?!
DAVIS?
"I'M NOT ON IT-- I'M LIVING IT! AAAHHHAAG! IT...HURTS!... THE HORROR OF IT--"
THE GALLERY

"THERE IS MORE FOR YOU TO EXPERIENCE..."
"I CAN FEEL PAIN THAT DOESN'T EXIST YET. TASTE DECAY THAT--"
"AN ECTOPIC PREGNANCY. SHE DOESN'T KNOW THE FETUS IS FORMING IN HER TUBE..."
"YOU WILL UNDERSTAND THROUGH EMPATHY..."
SPARE CHANGE, MAN? DIME? QUARTER? GIMME SOME CHANGE MAN. WANNA EAT...
"SO MUCH PAIN... DECAY... DEATH... IS JUST... THE FLESH... TRANFORMING?? --NO!!!"
MAKE IT STOP!!! TAKE THE PAIN AWAY!!! TAKE... IT... AWAY!!
MAKE IT STOP!!!
TO UNDERSTAND THE FLESH, YOU MUST PASS BEYOND THE FLESH.
MELD WITH THE NEW ORDER THAT IS DECREED BY OUR LORD LEVIATHON.
LORD LEVIATHAN'S POWER WILL REMAKE YOUR IMPERT FORM, REALIGN THE CHAOS OF THE FLESH.

"SHOW LIFE REMADE ANEW BY HIS EXAMPLE."
"TO TRULY UNDERSTAND ART, THE ARTIST MUST RESTRUCTURE THE WORLD AND HIMSELF THROUGH HIS WORK..."
"TRANSFORM THROUGH HIS WORK..."
DAVIS? DAVIS! WHERE ARE YOU?
"The secret of life is to appreciate the pleasure of being terribly deceived..." -OSCAR WILDE.
The End



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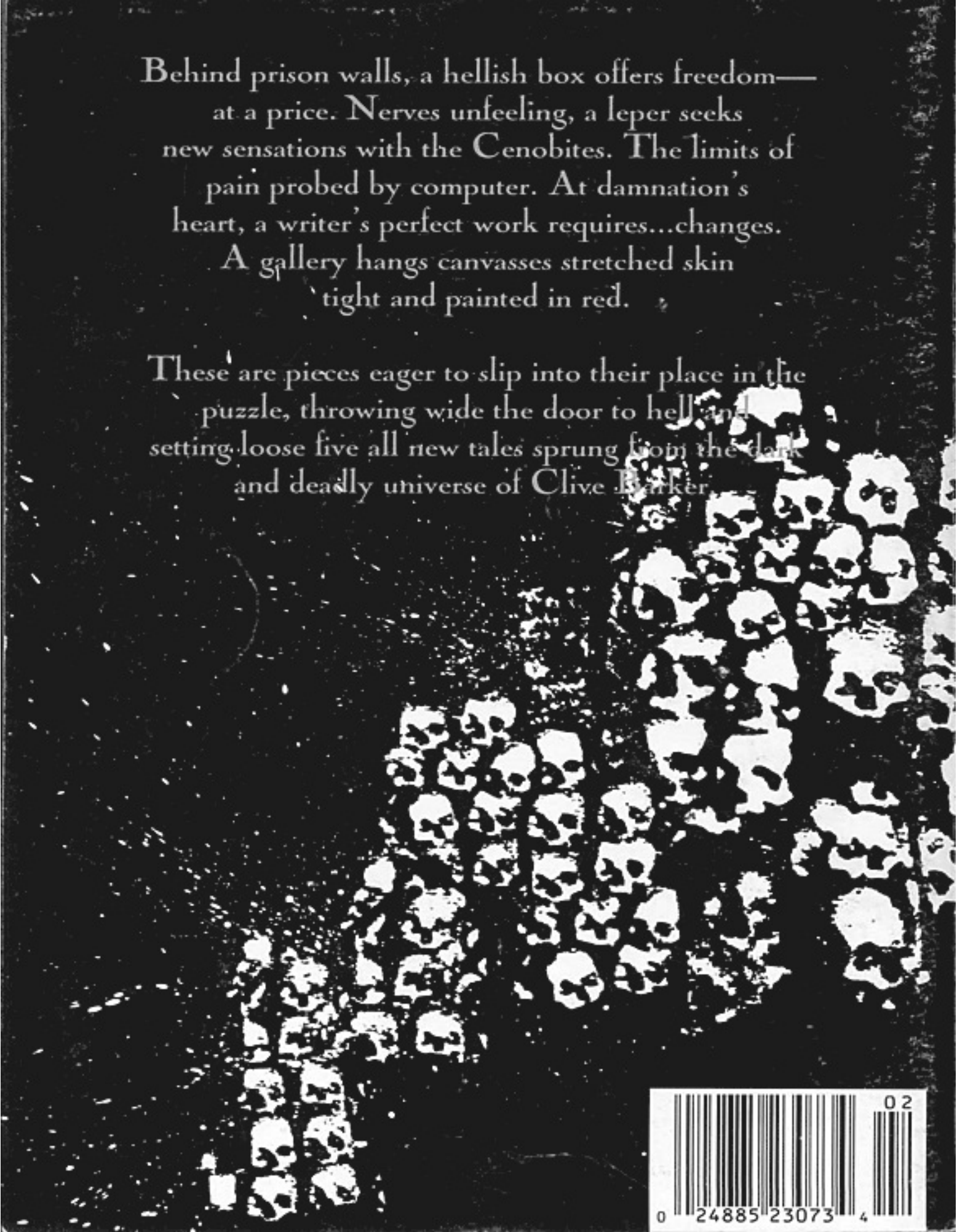
Behind prison walls, a hellish box offers freedom—
at a price. Nerves unfeeling, a leper seeks
new sensations with the Cenobites. The limits of
pain probed by computer. At damnation's
heart, a writer's perfect work requires...changes.
A gallery hangs canvasses stretched skin
tight and painted in red.

These are pieces eager to slip into their place in the
puzzle, throwing wide the door to hell and
setting loose five all new tales sprung from the dark
and deadly universe of Clive Barker.



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